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African Women Writers and the Politics of Gender

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the work of a group of African women writers who have emerged over the last forty years. While figures such as Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri and Wole Soyinka are likely to be the chief focus of discussions of African writing, female authors have been at the forefront of fictional interrogations of identity formation and history. In the work of authors such as Mariama Bâ (Senegal), Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria), Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe), and Leila Aboulela (Sudan), there is a clear attempt to subvert the tradition of male writing where the female characters are often relegated to the margins of the culture, and confined to the domestic, private sphere. This body of work has already generated a significant number of critical responses, including readings that draw on gender politics and colonialism; but it is still very much a minor literature, and most mainstream western feminism has not sufficiently processed it. The purpose of this thesis is threefold. First, it draws together some of the most important and influential African women writers of the post-war period and looks at their work, separately and together, in terms of a series of themes and issues, including marriage, family, polygamy, religion, childhood, and education. Second, it demonstrates how African literature produced by women writers is explicitly and polemically engaged with urgent political issues that have both local and global resonance: the veil, Islamophobia and a distinctively African brand of feminist critique. Third, it revisits Fredric Jameson's claim that all third-world texts are 'national allegories' and considers these novels by African women in relation to Jameson's claim, arguing that their work has complicated Jameson's assumptions.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature _____

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Introduction: *Sani Baat* — Throwing Voice¹

If we don't tell our stories, hailstones will continue to fall on our heads,
 Thrown by fathers for the children to see – for we are not good women,
 Thrown by Imams, by a judge's decree – for we are not good wives,
 Thrown by other women in our husbands' lives
 As they come in the morning cradling his children
 Calling us witch, barren, bitch
 And we find something to tie the chest with;
 Challenging words to hurl back in battle,
 And partners to hold us anyway,
 Through the things we struggle against.²

Prominence of Women in African Oral Traditions

According to Obioma Nnaemeka, in African oral traditions women were highly visible not only as performers but also as producers of knowledge, particularly regarding oral literature's educational relevance and moral obligations.³ Researchers in the field of African oral tradition have recorded the active participation of women in the preservation and transmission of oral literature.⁴ According to Nnaemeka, women played a prominent role not only in panegyric poetry but also in elegiac poetry.⁵ Ruth Finnegan further points out that 'every Akan woman is expected to have some competence in the dirge, and though some singers are considered more accomplished than others, nevertheless every woman

¹ I am here referring to the Wolof oral tradition *Sani Baat*, which literally means 'throw in.' For Mary Modupe Kolawole, the advent of women's writing is a form of 'voice throwing' to counter, disrupt, or problematize a patriarchal flow of discourse. For Siga Fatima Jagne, these disruptive rhetorical strategies bring the speaker into the centre of the discourse. See Mary Modupe Kolawole, 'The Context of African Women's Struggle', in *Womanism and African Consciousness* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998), pp. 3-43; see also Siga Fatima Jagne, 'Postcolonial Criticism and African Writing', in *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Source Book*, ed. Pushpa Naidu Parekh and Siga Fatima Jagne (London & Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998), pp. 2-17.

² Abena P. A. Busia, 'A Song in Seven Stanzas for Our Granddaughters', in *African Women Writing Resistance: An Anthology of Contemporary Voices*, ed. Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, Paulina Dongala, Omotoya Jolaosho, and Anne Serafin (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), p. xx.

³ See Obioma Nnaemeka, 'From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the (Re)Inscription of Womanhood', *Research in African Literatures*, 25.4 (1994), pp. 137-157; see also Enoch. T. Mvula, 'Tumbuka Pounding Songs in the Management of Familial Conflicts', in *Crossrhythms*, ed. Daniel Avorghedor and Dkwesi Yankah (Bloomington: Indiana University Folklore Publications, 1983), pp. 93-113; Beverly B. Mack, 'Waka Daya Ta Kare Nika – One Song Will Not Finish the Grinding: Hausa Women's Oral Literature', in *Contemporary African Literature*, ed. Hal Wiley, Eileen Julien, and Russell J. Linneman (Washington, D.C.: Three Continent Press, 1983), pp. 15-46.

⁴ See Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); G.P. Lestrade, 'Bantu Praise Poems', *The Critic*, 4.1 (1935), pp. 1-10; H. Owuor, 'Luo Songs', *Black Orpheus*, 10 (1961), pp. 51-56.

⁵ Nnaemeka, 'From Orality to Writing', p. 138.

mourner at a funeral is expected to sing — or run the risk of strong criticism, possibly even suspicion of complicity in death.’⁶ This suggests the vital importance of oral performance and female participation as a compulsory ritual in those recitals. Finnegan contends that in some parts of Africa, prose narratives, which are not directly connected to life cycles, are also dominated by women: ‘In some areas, it is the women, often the old women, who tend to be most gifted, even when the stories themselves are universally known.’⁷

For both Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory, the existence of active and powerful women in African oral tradition has been a vital source of inspiration for African women.⁸ Nnaemeka proposes that, ‘studies of the content and form of African oral tradition reveal the centrality of women as subjects.’⁹ Nnaemeka discusses the Gikuyu creation myth,¹⁰ which identified women as bold founders and forgers of dynasties, and Aoua Keita, a Bamana-born woman who led a resistance movement for the independence of French Equatorial Africa.¹¹ As Deirdre LaPin notes, in Aoua Keita’s autobiography, *Femme d’Afrique*, Keita attributes her moral strength and forcefulness to the lessons she learned from the activities of women in oral tradition.¹² Nnaemeka explores how African women writers have repeatedly acknowledged their gratitude to mothers who were great

⁶ Finnegan, ‘Poetry and Patronage’, in *Oral Literature in Africa*, p. 103.

⁷ Finnegan, ‘Prose Narrative II. Content and Form’, p. 375.

⁸ Carole Boyce Davies, Elaine Savory Fido, ‘African Women Writers: Towards a Literary History’, in *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures*, ed. Oyekan Owomoyela (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), pp. 311-346.

⁹ Nnaemeka, ‘From Orality to Writing’, p. 138.

¹⁰ ‘In the beginning of things the man Gikuyu, the founder of the tribe, found that the Mogai (The Divider of the Universe) had provided him with a beautiful wife whom Gikuyu named Moombi (creator or moulder). (Gikuyu had no male heirs, a situation which Mogai rectified by providing nine strangers who married Gikuyu’s nine daughters and thus set up nine matrilineages.) It is said that while holding superior position in the community, the women became domineering and ruthless. Through sexual jealousy, many men were put to death for committing adultery or other minor offences. The men were indignant at the way in which the women treated them, and planned to revolt. It was decided that the best time for a successful revolt would be the time when the majority of women, especially their leaders, were in pregnancy. (The men impregnated the women and the revolt succeeded. Polygyny replaced polyandry.) The women frankly told the men that if they dared to eliminate the names which stood as a recognition that women were the original founders of the clan system, the women would refuse to bear any more children (hence the men agreed to let the nine main clans retain the names of the daughters of Gikuyu).’ For more discussion see Margaret Strobel, ‘Women in Religious and Secular Ideologies’, in *African Women South of Sahara*, ed. Margaret Jean Hay and Sharon Stichter (London: Longman, 1984), pp. 101-118.

¹¹ Nnaemeka, ‘From Orality to Writing’, pp. 138, 139.

¹² See Deirdre LaPin, ‘Women in African Literature’, in *African Women South of Sahara*, pp. 143-163.

and resourceful storytellers.¹³ For example, Grace Ogot, a Kenyan writer whose first novel *The Promised Land* (1966) was published in the same year as Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, claims that she was influenced by her grandmother: 'My interest in writing fiction may have started at a very early age, stimulated by my childhood keenness to listen to my grandmother's folk tales. She was a renowned storyteller.'¹⁴ In the same vein, Buchi Emecheta pays tribute to her 'Big Mother': 'But the Ibo story teller was different. She was always one's mother. My Big Mother was my aunt. [...] It was a result of those visits to Ibuza, coupled with the enjoyment and information those stories used to give us, that I determined when I grew older that I was going to be a story teller, like my Big Mother.'¹⁵

Invisibility of Women in African Literary Canon

If the significance of women in the African oral tradition cannot be contested, why are they absent from the African literary canon? Why is it that the field of African literature is dominated by male writers such as Achebe, Ngũgĩ and Soyinka? Nnaemeka posits that as the change was made from oral to written literature, new requirements for rhetorical mastery appeared. The elements that legitimated centrality altered from those based upon sex and age to those anchored in the knowledge of the colonisers' languages —English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese.¹⁶ Apart from the colonisers' languages, the ideals of Victorian colonial education became an additional hindrance for African women writers.¹⁷ The politics of publishing further complicated matters for African women writers. Grace Ogot records that politicised publishing houses during the colonial era failed sufficiently to encourage or nurture creative writers:

¹³ Nnaemeka, 'From Orality to Writing', p. 143.

¹⁴ Bernth Lindfors, 'Interview with Grace Ogot', *World Literature Written in English*, 18.1 (1979), p. 57.

¹⁵ Buchi Emecheta, 'Feminism with a Small "f"', in *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers' Conference Stockholm 1986*, ed. Kirsten Holst Petersen (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988), pp. 173-174.

¹⁶ Nnaemeka, 'From Orality to Writing', p. 139.

¹⁷ See Adu Albert Bohen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1987); Gail P. Kelly, Carolyn M. Elliot, ed. *Women's Education in the Third World: Comparative Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982); and Victor Uchendu, *Education and Politics in Tropical Africa* (London: Conch, 1979).

As far as book publishing was concerned, the East African Literature Bureau was ready to publish anything written in the mother tongue languages. They could also publish material in English, but at that time they did not encourage creative writing at all. I remember taking some of my short stories to the Manager, including the one which was later published in *Black Orpheus*. They really couldn't understand how a Christian woman could write such stories, involved with sacrifices, traditional medicines and all, instead of writing about Salvation and Christianity.¹⁸

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) was the first published novel written by an African woman. However, by the time it appeared, a distinctively male literary tradition was already established in Africa.

Male African Critics and African Women Writers

In *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994), Florence Stratton criticises Gerald Moore, Eustace Palmer, and Eldred Jones for inaccurate evaluations of women's novels.¹⁹ According to Stratton, Eustace Palmer's *An Introduction to the African Novel* (1972) refers only once to a woman writer, labelling Flora Nwapa as 'an inferior novelist.'²⁰ Stratton further highlights that women are also absent from Palmer's second book, *The Growth of the African Novel* (1979), and Gerald Moore's *Twelve African Writers* (1980). Stratton contends that Palmer and other male critics are using a western or male-dominated canon as a standard for African literature, and completely discounting the fact that their canon excludes women writers. In his introduction to *Twelve African Writers*, Gerald Moore expresses regret, that due to the limited space in his study, he cannot accommodate 'such new writers as Nuruddin Farah, Ebrahim Hussein, Kole Omotoso, and

¹⁸ Lindfors, 'Interview with Grace Ogot', *World Literature Written in English*, pp. 58-59.

¹⁹ See Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London: Routledge, 1994).

²⁰ Eustace Palmer, 'Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart*', in *An Introduction to the African Novel* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 61.

Femi Osofisan.²¹ Stratton indicates that according to this list of male writers, it is worth noticing that by the late 1970s there were numerous women writers who could no longer be described as ‘new’, such as Bessie Head and Flora Nwapa, both of whom had three novels and a collection of short stories to their credit.²²

Ama Ata Aidoo also canvassed the ongoing problems faced by African woman writers at the Second African Writers’ Conference, held in Stockholm in 1986. In her paper, entitled ‘To be an African Woman Writer —An Overview and a Detail’, she deplores exclusionary practices and the lack of serious attention from both African and non-African male critics:

In March of 1985, Professor Dieter Riemenschneider came to Harare to give a lecture on some regional approach to African literature. The lecture lasted at least two hours. In all that time, Professor Riemenschneider did not find it possible to mention a single African woman writer. When this was pointed out to him later, he said he was sorry, but it had been ‘so natural.’ I could have died. It had been natural to forget that quite a bit of modern African literature was produced by women?

Why should it be ‘natural’ to forget that some African women had been writing and publishing for as long as some African men writers?²³

Aidoo noted that the critical material on women writers has appeared rarely, either in special topic books or in so-called ‘special issues’ of a few critical journals, for example, the fifteenth volume of *African Literature Today* on women in African literature, published in 1987. However this academic scholarship, according to Aidoo, is ‘often absent-minded at the best, and at the worst, full of veiled ridicule and resentment. When commentary on African women in literature is none of the above, it is certain to be disorganised (or rather

²¹ Gerald Moore, ‘Introduction’, in *Twelve African Writers* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), p. 8.

²² Stratton, ‘Introduction: Exclusionary Practices’, p. 2.

²³ Ama Ata Aidoo, ‘To be an African Woman — An Overview and a Detail’, in *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 159.

unorganised) and choked full of condescension.’²⁴ Aidoo argues that as writers, African women have the right to be treated as equals, to expect that ‘critics try harder to give [their] work some of their best in time and attention, as well as the full weight of their intelligence, just like they do for the work of their male counterparts.’²⁵

Nationalism and African Women Writers

Fredric Jameson’s characterisation of ‘third-world’ literature can also be seen as exclusionary given that he does not mention a single woman writer.²⁶ Jameson’s ‘sweeping hypothesis,’²⁷ as he himself concedes, positions third-world literature as ‘national allegory.’ He writes that ‘[t]hird-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*’²⁸ By contrast, he goes on, the First World text is not conscious of its nationalising designs in the same way. Arguing against Jameson, Elleke Boehmer suggests that:

many narratives preoccupied with the social and national imaginary can be understood as inscribing the nation, and [...] these nation-informing stories are by no means exclusive to the Third World. Indeed, many hail from the First World. If anything, this has become more evidently the case with the 1990s resurgence of nationalist preoccupations in the west and in the former Second World (think only of devolution in the UK).²⁹

²⁴ Aidoo, ‘To be an African Woman’, p. 165.

²⁵ Aidoo, ‘To be an African Woman’, p. 168.

²⁶ See Fredric Jameson, ‘Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, *Social Text*, 15 (1986), pp. 65-88.

²⁷ Jameson, ‘Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, p. 69.

²⁸ Jameson, ‘Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, p. 69.

²⁹ Elleke Boehmer, ‘Introduction’, in *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 12.

The powerful presence of British nationalism during the recent Olympics 2012 in Britain has further demonstrated that nationalism is not exclusively associated with the third-world. For Aijaz Ahmad, Jameson's 'national allegory' thesis has a colonialist predisposition:

There is doubtless a personal, somewhat existential side to my encounter with this text, which is best clarified at the outset. I have been reading Jameson's work now for roughly fifteen years, and at least some of what I know about the literatures and cultures of Western Europe and the USA comes from him; and because I am Marxist, I had always thought of us, Jameson and myself, as birds of the same feather, even though we never quite flocked together. But then, when I was on the fifth page of this text (specifically, on the sentence starting with 'All third-world texts are necessarily. . . ' etc.), I realised that what was being theorized was, among many other things, myself. Now, I was born in India and I write poetry in Urdu, a language not commonly understood among US intellectuals. So I said to myself: 'All? . . . necessarily?' It felt odd. Matters became much more curious, however. For the further I read, the more I realised, with no little chagrin, that the man whom I had for so long, so affectionately, albeit from a physical distance, taken as a comrade was, in his own opinion, my civilizational Other. It was not a good feeling.³⁰

According to Boehmer, nationalism is important for once-colonised countries, and the novels of these countries will be concerned to 'configure the nation by way of organising (and often gendered) metaphors, if not strictly speaking as allegories in every case.'³¹

However, according to Boehmer, the presence of female authors who are more involved with those narratives which cannot be incorporated into the official history, has made

³⁰ Aijaz Ahmad, 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory"', in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London & New York: Verso, 1992), p. 96.

³¹ Boehmer, 'Introduction', p. 12; see also Neil Lazarus, 'Fredric Jameson on "Third-World Literature": A Qualified Defence', in *Fredric Jameson: A Critical Reader*, ed. Sean Homer and Douglas Kellner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 42-61.

Jameson's formulation of the 'national allegory' problematic. Women writers utilise their novels to reclaim and reconfigure national and other identities: 'By conveying a complex give-and-take between public and private spaces, women writers use the novel as a powerful instrument with which to reshape national cultures in a way more hospitable to women's presence.'³² Therefore exclusion of or critical condescension towards women writers and their complex politics, and the assumption that third-world literature is one homogeneous male commodity which is only concerned with 'nationalism', are both shortcomings on Jameson's part.

African Women Writers' Entrance into the Literary Canon

African women writers have struggled to gain literary attention and also admission to the literary canon. Stratton observed that Bernth Lindfors' 'The Famous Authors' Reputation Test: An Update to 1986'³³ (the statistics in order to establish a writer's canonical status), and 'The Teaching of African Literatures in Anglophone African Universities: An Instructive Canon'³⁴ (the frequency with which Anglophone African universities include an author in their curricula in 1986) reveals an all-male canon. Achebe, Ngũgĩ, and Soyinka occupy the top three positions, while the next seven are occupied by Ayi Kwei Armah, John Pepper Clark, Okot p'Bitek, Christopher Okigbo, Pete Abrahams, Alex La Guma, and Dennis Brutus. Stratton noted that, Ama Ata Aidoo and Bessie Head occupy the fifteenth and eighteenth position respectively, and thus come close to obtaining a canonical status.³⁵

According to Chikwenye Ogunyemi, the 1986 and 1988 awards of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Wole Soyinka of Nigeria and Naguib Mahfouz of Egypt have brought

³² Boehmer, 'Introduction', p. 12.

³³ Bernth Lindfors, 'The Famous Authors' Reputation Test: An Update to 1986', in *Semper Aliquid Novi: Littérature comparée et littératures d'Afrique: Mélanges Albert Gérard*, ed. János Riesz and Alan Ricard (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1990), pp. 131-43.

³⁴ Bernth Lindfors, 'The Teaching of African Literatures in Anglophone African Universities: An Instructive Canon', *Matatu*, 7 (1990), pp. 41-55.

³⁵ See Stratton, 'Introduction: Exclusionary Practices', p. 3.

international acclaim to African literature, which has increased pressure for meaningful dialogue along gender lines.³⁶ Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi argued that the increase in scholarly inquiries on, by, and about women in the mid-1980s was another important factor in changing the status of African women writers.³⁷ In university curricula, the writings of African women are still dominated by well-established and important African male authors, such as Achebe (Nigeria), Ngũgĩ (Kenya), and Ousmane Sembène (Senegal). However, as Nfah-Abbenyi has commented, this situation is gradually changing, as many scholars of African literature in the west are now including African women writers in their courses. This change, according to Nfah-Abbenyi, has also affected many African universities, where curricula have traditionally been 'Eurocentric and/or African male-oriented.'³⁸

African Women Writers and the Politics of Gender

In Charlotte Bruner's critical opinion, African women writers are practising their craft under challenging circumstances. In her preface to *Unwinding Threads: Writing by Women in Africa* (1983), she notes that:

[t]he African woman writing fiction today has to be somehow exceptional. Despite vast differences in traditions and beliefs among African societies, any female writer must have defied prevailing tradition if she speaks out as an individual and as a woman. In order to reach an international audience directly, she often has had to cross linguistic barriers. She may well have confronted the dictates of societies in which the perpetuation of a tradition submerges the contribution of the innovator, in which the subservience of the individual to the community is reinforced by group sanctions. In such societies, the accepted role of any artist is to

³⁶ See Chikwenye Ogunyemi, 'Firing Can(n)ons: Salvos by African Women Writers', in *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 2.

³⁷ See Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi 'Introduction', in *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 4.

³⁸ See Nfah-Abbenyi, 'Introduction', p. 4; For some of the reasons why the teaching of African literature in Africa has not gained as much ground as might have been expected since 1963, see Chidi Ikonne, 'African Literature in Africa Twenty-Five Years After the Dakar and Freetown Conferences', in *African Literature, 1988: New Masks*, ed. Hal Wylie, Dennis Brutus, and Juris Silenieks (Washington DC: Three Continents, 1990), pp. 97-105.

commemorate custom, in words, in song, and in the selection of the details that validate the accepted ethics of that society. Generally, then, the perpetuator is preferred to the creator. To be outstanding is to court rejection.³⁹

The work of African women writers in this thesis demonstrates that they are not perpetuators but rather creators. Their work strives to create a more egalitarian culture and challenges the narrow-minded and patriarchal ethics of their respective societies. Despite being underscrutinized by readers and academic scholars, African women novelists' writings are numerous, inventively eclectic and insightful. This thesis examines, through a series of close readings and careful contextualising, the work of a cluster of African women writers who have emerged over the last forty years. In the work of authors such as Mariama Bâ (Senegal), Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria), Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe), and Leila Aboulela (Sudan), there is a clear and robust attempt to complicate or subvert the tradition of male writing in which female characters are often relegated to the margins of the culture, and confined to the domestic, private sphere. This body of work has already generated a significant number of critical responses, including readings that draw on gender politics and colonialism; but it is still very much a minor literature, and western feminism has not yet engaged with it. Western feminism here refers to the movement inspired by writers such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Stanton, Simone De Beauvoir and Kate Millett with their principal focus on the social and existential problems confronting European and American women. Germaine Greer's pioneering work, *The Female Eunuch* (1970), criticises traditional family structures and argues that the nuclear family suppresses women both emotionally and sexually; rendering them eunuchs. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan argues in a similar vein, excoriating the family system as the pivotal factor in women's oppression. According to Friedan, for the sake of the survival of the American nation, women can no longer ignore

³⁹ Charlotte Bruner, 'Preface to the First Edition', in *Unwinding Threads: Writing by Women in Africa* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1994), p. vii.

the voices in their heads: “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.”⁴⁰ Shulamith Firestone also claims in her work *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) that ‘unless revolution uproots the basic social organization, the biological family—the vinculum through which the psychology of power can always be smuggled—the tapeworm of exploitation will never be annihilated.’⁴¹ I am not suggesting here that western/white feminism is one monolithic movement. The first wave of modern western feminism began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and concentrated on women’s right to vote and their participation in the public sphere. The second wave of western feminism commenced in the 1960s and continued into the 1990s. This phase of feminism was focused on women’s reproductive rights, and their repression under patriarchal society, and critiqued women’s roles as wives and mothers. The third phase began in the mid-1990s and disrupted the notions of ‘universal womanhood’ ‘gender’ and ‘normative heterosexuality’ and was heavily invested in bisexual and transgender identities.⁴² Rebecca Walker reportedly started this new movement in 1992 when she announced, ‘I am the Third Wave.’⁴³ According to R. Claire Snyder, ‘third-wavers depict their version of feminism as more inclusive and racially diverse than the second wave,’⁴⁴ but we cannot ignore the class privilege of Rebecca Walker, the Yale educated daughter of Alice Walker and Jewish American lawyer, Mel Leventhal. However, this western feminist ideology does not address the experiences of black women, especially in the context of historical and contemporary racism and imperialism. Elizabeth Stanton, a leading figure in the early women’s rights movement in America, wrote in 1865:

⁴⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1963), p. 32.

⁴¹ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), p. 12.

⁴² See Judith Worell, ed. *Encyclopaedia of Women and Gender: Sex Similarities and Differences and the Impact of Society on Gender* (San Diego, California & London: Academic Press, 2001); see also Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Movement in America 1848-1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); R. Claire Snyder, ‘What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay’, *Signs*, 34.1 (2008), pp. 175-196; and Martha Rampton, ‘The Three Waves of Feminism’, http://www.pacificu.edu/magazine_archives/2008/fall/echoes/feminism.cfm. [accessed 17th April 2014].

⁴³ Rebecca Walker, ‘Becoming the Third Wave’, in *Identity Politics in the Women’s Movement*, ed. Barbara Ryan (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 80.

⁴⁴ Snyder, ‘What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay’, p. 180.

The representation of women of the nation have done their uttermost for the last 30 years to secure freedom for the negroes and as long as he was the lowest in the scale of being we were willing to press his claims but now, as the celestial gate to civil rights is slowly moving on its hinges, it becomes a serious question whether we had better stand aside and see 'sambo' walk into the kingdom first.⁴⁵

Despite the foundational racism of her argument, Stanton overlooked the presence of black women and also showed her inability to understand how racism affects gender relations. As Filomina Chioma Steady contends, '[f]or the black woman, the enemy is not black men but history.'⁴⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay 'French Feminism in an International Frame' and bell hooks's book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* throw into sharper relief the differences and difficulties with western feminism.

This thesis proposes that African women writers are not writing against the grain of western feminist theories. The work of African women writers in this thesis underlines African women's specific problems and their emancipation and empowerment within their own particular cultural positions. In their diverse discussions of women's oppression, they also critique the part played by older women (usually mothers-in-law) and younger women (sisters-in-law and co-wives). However, by speaking for other African women, these writers do not appropriate women's experiences, but rather speak 'out of concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive effects involved', as Linda Alcoff puts it.⁴⁷ African women writers impugn patriarchal/nationalist values and also western misreading/misunderstanding of their cultural practices. Therefore their work and their characters are struggling against patriarchal values at home and persistent Eurocentrism abroad. Against this background, their characters are negotiating identities which are

⁴⁵ Cited in Valerie Amos, Pratibha Parmar, 'Challenging Imperialism Feminism', *Feminist Review*, 17 (1984), p. 5.

⁴⁶ Filomina Chioma Steady, 'The Black Woman Cross-Culturally: An Overview', in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, ed. Filomina Chioma Steady (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc., 1981), p. 35.

⁴⁷ Linda Alcoff, 'The Problem of Speaking for Others', *Cultural Critique*, 20 (1991-92), p. 24.

neither essentialised nor unified but rather multiple. African women's negotiations of motherhood, feminism, marriage and religion (Islam in the context of this thesis) need to be gauged within their own cultural and material realities; otherwise, there is a danger of producing misrepresentations.

Chapter Overview

My first chapter canvasses the institution of polygamy and the negotiation between modernity and tradition in Mariama Bâ's novels *So Long a Letter* (1980) and *Scarlet Song* (1981). I suggest that through failed marriages in *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, Bâ is criticising the cultural and religious infrastructures of her society, which allow biased and prejudiced traditions towards women to flourish - traditions which inevitably strengthen male interests. I discuss polygamy in Islam and argue that Bâ is condemning the misappropriation of polygamy, but not polygamy itself as a cultural institution.

Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, and Mireille, Bâ's three heroines, have been kept in the dark, as their husbands contracted a second marriage, despite the fact that they themselves chose their respective husbands. Bâ's women are faced with abandonment as a result of the infidelity which their spouses committed.

These issues throw into sharper relief the politics of women's power and familial control. A key concern here is how some women alongside men in Bâ's work (mothers in the roles of mothers-in-law) become accomplices of patriarchal structures, and are held responsible for the isolation, neglect and madness of women in relatively weaker positions. Bâ's work exhibits in great detail social injustices, the weight of unjust traditions, and selfish and abusive interpretations of Islam. I propose that Bâ's struggle for female emancipation and equality against myriad forms of oppression takes place within the locus of Senegalese culture.

The second chapter explores the changing concepts of marriage and motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's fiction. I address *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second-Class Citizen* (1975), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *Double Yoke* (1983), *Gwendolen* (1990), and *Kehinde* (1994), and suggest that Emecheta interrogates the glorifying images of the African Mother created and propagated by male African

writers. Emecheta argues that motherhood should be a choice, not an imposition. Rather than presenting an idealised view of motherhood, she supplies a nuanced and challenging account of the experiences of motherhood. I examine how in Emecheta's work marriage and motherhood contain, police and domesticate the child-bearing spouse, and how important it is for the Nigerian society to reconstruct these institutions.

I examine Emecheta's difficulties with the label of feminism which African writers and critics have named womanism, stiwanism, motherism, and negofeminism. I suggest that a distinctively African brand of feminist critique is unique in amalgamating a commitment to intellectual, educational and economic progress for women with the retention of an emphasis on home and those indigenous traditions which are not subsuming women's humanity. Emecheta recognises the need for a balanced, mature and equal relationship between male and female within the socio-cultural structures of Nigeria.

My third chapter begins with a brief overview of the Nigerian civil war, which lasted for three years (1967-1970), and claimed approximately two million lives. I calibrate how different ethnicities in Nigeria were affected by the war, especially the Ogoni people, who live in the Niger Delta where most of Nigeria's oil is located. This chapter considers representations of the civil war in Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). I contend that these war narratives arise from a sense that Nigerians have not fully confronted the effects of Biafra's legacy. I indicate that, apart from the politicisation of ethnicities, colonialism and neo-colonialism were the major causes behind the war. The creation of Nigeria, by putting together people of different ethnicities and religions with no shared sense of civic identity, is the result of western economic interests. After the independence of Nigeria, British political interests showed more regard for securing a lucrative share in Nigeria's oil resources than maintaining the peace and stability of a newly created independent state.

These women writers position their war narratives within a framework of the Nigerian civil war in order to explore the signal part played by women in healing the traumatised and splintered communities. I contend that these texts, by two women of different generations, are breaking an uncomfortable silence and enabling Nigerians to confront their dark past and achieve closure. In doing so, they reinforce the necessity for new narratives of healing, hope and recovery. Their fictions make the case for a restorative use of the past, a coming to terms with Biafran tragedy in order to move forward as a nation. In concluding, I posit that the war narratives of Emecheta and Adichie represent a different political expression, one of forgiving but not forgetting.

I begin Chapter Four with a discussion of Tsitsi Dangarembga's novels, examining their exploration of the manipulative nature of imperialism, the value of western education, and the risks of cultural disaffection which can be an outcome of such education. I prioritise Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and its sequel *The Book of Not* (2006), and explore how both patriarchy and colonisation work together towards female subservience. Dangarembga's main characters in both novels, Nyasha and Tambu, are influenced by two unique cultures, indigenous and imperial. The colonising culture oppresses them, but it also provides certain advantages to her female protagonists. Ngũgĩ's *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) condemns colonial education as morbid, and declares it responsible for social alienation and disintegration. However, in *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* the colonial education is a liberating and simultaneously an oppressive process for women.

This chapter also discusses Shona patriarchal culture, especially the collaboration of the missionary and colonial system with Shona culture in racially segregated Rhodesia; and how this collaboration oppresses African men in favour of white men, and African women in favour of African men. Tambu's infatuation with colonial education in *Nervous Conditions* is not about the high morals of imperial education, but her freedom and

economic success. Class, it is implied, plays an important role in Tambu's reluctance to criticise openly the partialities and discriminations of the colonial educational system that she encounters in boarding school. I evaluate how her privileged education at a racially-mixed young ladies' college has deleterious effects, eroding her self-respect and dignity, with the result that the spirited and optimistic girl of *Nervous Conditions* is listless in *The Book of Not*.

Chapter Four also canvasses the *unhu* philosophy of empathy and compassion for human beings in African cultures, and suggests that Tambu's *unhu* is shattered by the racism she encounters in a multi-racial convent. I also assess the maintenance of colonial hierarchical structures in postcolonial Zimbabwe, where racism continues to influence the present and future in a harmful way, and look at the ways in which Tambu, as a subject of postcolonial Zimbabwe, is still struggling to integrate into this new nation.

Chapter Five considers Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), and *Lyrics Alley* (2010). Islam has an important place in these fictional works, but the version practised by Aboulela's characters differs significantly from mainstream western representations of the religion. I scrutinise the politicisation of Islam, particularly in relation to Muslim women, and the role of the western media in the propagation of Islamophobia. I argue that Aboulela's work depicts *Sufi* Islam, which has particular significance in the present socio-political context because of its intrinsic opposition to the orthodox interpretations of Islam, and its inclusion of women as equal partners in both spiritual and material endeavours.

I propose that Aboulela's fiction is a response to the stereotyping of Muslims in the western media: through her work, she stresses the importance of dispelling the embedded belief that Islam acts as an impediment to women's self-actualisation. This, Aboulela suggests, stems from a male-manipulated interpretation of the religion for various political

and material purposes. Consequently, she encourages western readers not to think of Muslim women as being oppressed by Islam and misogyny that it supposedly sanctions, helplessly waiting for the west to come and rescue them. Aboulela's interpretation of Islam is multifaceted and unorthodox; her characters do not follow the religion with absolute strictness. Her texts emphasise the inner *sharia* of her characters over the patriarchal versions of Islam, often encrypted in an unexamined official *sharia*. I also evaluate the politics of the veil in Aboulela's work, and her ambiguous attitude towards veiling as a complex and continuing symbol of the otherness of Islam and of Muslim women's suppression.

When a Man Loves a Woman: Betrayal and Abandon(ship) in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1980) and *Scarlet Song* (1981)

Take me in a vehicle.
 Take me in a vehicle.
 I have been sent for from my home.
 I have been sent for from my home.
 This one who came with her mother,
 What does she have that I don't have?
 I want a man who is eight feet.
 The one who came with her mother,
 What does she have that I don't have?
 I want a man who is eight feet.¹

Themes of Abandonment in African Women Writers' Fiction

The theme of abandonment and desertion is very prominent in female African writing, including Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *Double Yoke* (1982), Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1981) and *Efuru* (1966), and Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974). In the works of female African writers women are abandoned either by their husbands, fathers or sons. These works exhibit in searching and subtle detail social injustices, an oppressive weight of certain misogynist traditions and self-serving abusive interpretations of religion, which ultimately become the cause of tragedy in the lives of women. According to Bâ:

[T]he African woman writer has a special mission, given that the African social context is marked by glaring gender inequalities, exploitation, and ageless barbaric oppression of the so-called weaker sex. More than her male-counterpart, she must document fully the African women's condition. Injustices are still evident, segregation continues, despite the ten-year plan for women's development declared by the United Nations, in spite of grandiose discourse and laudable intentions.

¹ Loise Kalondu wa Maseki, 'Protest Against Polygamy', in *Women Writing Africa: The Eastern Region*, trans. Mwendu Mutuvi, ed. Amandina Lihamba, Fulata L. Moyo, M. M. Mulokozi, Naomi L. Shitemi, and Saida Yahya-Othman (New York: The Feminist Press, 2007), p. 398.

Discriminations are still abundant inside families and institutions, on the street, in the work place, in political assemblies.²

Bâ argues that women should take full ownership of their lives in order to ‘overthrow institutions so detrimental to us. We no longer endure them.’³ This is exactly what female African writers are doing: they are questioning those institutions and traditions which have become the cause of women’s discarded and abandoned situation.

Mbaye B. Cham describes abandonment through polygamy as a social ailment:

It is the cumulative result of the process that could be referred to as the gradual opening and enlargement of the emotional/sexual circle that originally binds two partners (a husband and a wife) to introduce and accommodate a third partner (a second wife) in a manner so devious and deceptive that a new process is set in motion. This new process itself culminates in a state of mind and body that forces the first female partner to re-evaluate the whole relationship by either reluctantly accepting or categorically rejecting the enlarged circle.⁴

Cham further argues that abandonment in the novels of Mariama Bâ is primarily a female condition and it ‘transcends race, class, ethnicity and caste.’⁵ However, reading Bâ’s fiction as a strong protest against polygamy is a limited comprehension of her work.

Polygamy and Islam

An influential body of critical opinion asserts that Bâ’s primary concern is polygamy, which has been sanctioned by Islamic cultural codes, and is thus the direct or indirect cause

² Mariama Bâ, ‘The Political Function of Written African Literatures’, in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), pp. 415-416.

³ Bâ, ‘The Political Function of Written African Literatures’, p. 416.

⁴ Mbaye B. Cham, ‘Contemporary Society and the Female Imagination: A Study of the Novels of Mariama Bâ’, *African Literature Today*, 15 (1987), p. 92.

⁵ Cham, ‘Contemporary Society and the Female Imagination’, p. 89.

of women's plight and miserable condition.⁶ Alphy J. Plakkootam argues that 'Islamic society is a society of inequality and discrimination and this novel lays bare the truth. [...] As long as Islam propagates and condones multiple marriages, man-woman relationships will not improve.'⁷

To view polygamy as an integral part of Islam, which is directly or indirectly responsible for women's desertion and abandonment is problematic. Polygamy is not exclusively associated with Islam. Judaism also permitted polygamy. For example, Sarah, due to her barrenness, offered her slave Hagar to her husband Abraham, in order to bear his children.⁸ In the book of Samuel, Elkanah, son of Jeroham, had two wives, Hannah and Penninah;⁹ and 'Lamech took unto him two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah.'¹⁰ This polygamous tradition is also present in some parts of the Christian community, for example, the Mormon doctrine developed by John Smith.¹¹ According to historians, polygamy was also widely practised in pre-Islamic Arabia.¹² Maha Yamani argues that the Prophet's tribe Quraysh was monogamous; however, this trend began to change with the emigration of the Prophet and his followers to Medina in 622 AD where there was a polygamous Jewish culture.¹³ Yamani further suggests that:

the Jewish presence in Medina and their initial interaction with the newly formed early Muslim community should be seen in light of the fact that polygamy did not have an earlier presence amongst the Prophet's tribe, Quraysh, in pre-Islamic

⁶ See Emeka Abanime, 'Review', *World Literature Today*, 54.2 (1980), p. 327; Lenita C. Locey, 'A Woman's Burden in *une si longue lettre*' *La Revue Francophone de Louisiane*, 11.1 (1987), pp. 48-52; and Yakini Kemp, 'Romantic Love and the Individual in Novels by Mariama Bâ, Buchi Emecheta, and Bessie Head', *Obsidian II*, 3.3 (1988), pp. 1-16.

⁷ Alphy J. Plakkootam, 'The Dynamics of Man-Woman Relationships in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*', *Indiana Journal of American Studies*, 23.2 (1993), p. 89.

⁸ See Gerda Lerner, 'The Patriarchs', in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 170-171.

⁹ I Samuel 1. 2.

¹⁰ Genesis 4. 19.

¹¹ See James E. Smith, Philip R. Kunz, 'Polygyny and Fertility in Nineteenth Century America', *Population Studies*, 30 (1976), pp. 465-80.

¹² See Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *Shari'ah: The Islamic Law* (London: Taha Publishers, 1984).

¹³ See Maha A. Z. Yamani, 'Polygamy in General', in *Polygamy and Law in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2008), p. 11.

Mecca. The Prophet himself remained monogamously married to his first wife Khadija, in Mecca, until her death. [...] the Prophet Muhammad then contracted a number of marriages for what are reported to have been moral, humanitarian, political, and legislative reasons.¹⁴

Surat-al-Nisa in the *Quran* deals with the issue of polygamy: ‘And if you fear that you cannot deal justly with orphans, then marry from the women who seem good to you, two or three or four. But if you fear that you cannot do justice (to so many), then one (only) or, the (captives) that your right hand possess. Thus it is more likely that ye will not do injustice.’¹⁵ These verses were revealed after the battle of Uhud, where many Muslim men were killed, and there were concerns about the welfare of the widows and orphans. Therefore interpretations of these verses vary among Muslim communities. For example, according to Leila Ahmed, these verses were revealed in order to deal with the specific problem of widows and orphans after the war, and therefore cannot be used to justify polygamy in normal circumstances.¹⁶ In his study of the rights of women in Islamic sharia, Rafi Ullah Shehab observes that Islam permits polygamy but with certain restrictions and conditions: ‘The main condition mentioned in the Holy Quran for allowing polygamy is to solve the problems of orphans and widows, but it also mentioned three conditions such as justice between wives, sexual capability and equality in meeting expenses. It may be mentioned here that if a person is not in a position to meet the expenses of one’s wife, he, according to Islamic law, is not allowed to marry.’¹⁷ A man is only allowed to marry when he can afford it: ‘And let those who can not afford marriage keep themselves chaste until Allah provides them with means.’¹⁸ Shehab argues that Islamic marriage has experienced changes as a result of contacts with other systems, and as a result certain rights which

¹⁴ Yamani, ‘Polygamy in General’, pp. 11-12.

¹⁵ *Al Quran*, Surat-al-Nisa, 4. 3.

¹⁶ See Leila Ahmed, ‘Women and the Rise of Islam’, in *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of Modern Debate* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 52.

¹⁷ Rafi Ullah Shehab, *Rights of Women in Islamic Sharia* (Lahore: Indus Publishing, 1986), p. 43.

¹⁸ *Al Quran*, Surah Al-Noor, 33.

Islam guarantees women are denied to them in practice. Amina Wadud argues that the Quranic verse ‘Ye are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if that were your ardent desire,’¹⁹ is about doing justice to the orphans. Wadud contends that the proponents of polygamy associate the concept of justice between co-wives with financial support. This, according to Wadud, ‘is an extension of the archaic concept of marriages of subjugation, because fairness is not based on quality of time, affection, intellectual or moral support.’²⁰ According to the Prophet, ‘a man who marries more women than one, and then does not deal justly with them, will be resurrected with half of his faculties paralysed.’²¹ This suggests a strict code of behavior for Muslim marriage whether monogamous or polygamous. Ramatoulaye’s suffering in a polygamous marriage is a result of Modou’s betrayal of her trust, and his refusal to obey Islamic principles specified for the polygamous arrangement.

So Long a Letter (1980) is the story of two western-educated friends, Aissatou and Ramatoulaye. The period is the 1960s, the post-independence era in Senegal. Initially, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are happily married to the men of their choice. However, both women are then confronted with their husbands taking a second wife, and they react differently to their similar circumstances. Aissatou strongly rejects the polygamous situation and leaves her husband Mawdo, a doctor, for a successful professional career as an interpreter in the Senegalese Embassy in the United States. By contrast, Ramatoulaye, the narrator, remains with her husband Modou in the hope that he will follow the Islamic rule of equal attention and sharing of the husband in a polygamous arrangement. However, Modou will ultimately desert Ramatoulaye and her children in favour of his new wife Binetou. When Modou dies of a heart attack, Ramatoulaye emphatically declines all polygamous suitors who want to marry her.

¹⁹ *Al Quran*, 4. 129.

²⁰ See Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman* (Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1992), p. 82.

²¹ Cited in Doi, ‘Ta’addud Al-Zawjat: Polygamy’, in *Shari’ah: The Islamic Law*, p. 148.

Modou's *secret* marriage to Binetou, Modou's teenage daughter Daba's friend, with its resultant humiliation brings anguish to Ramatoulaye:

And in the evening of this same Sunday on which Binetou was being married off I saw come into my house, all dressed up and solemn, Tasmir, Modou's brother, with Mawdo Bâ and his local *Imam*. [...] I sat in front of them, laughing with them. The Imam attacked:

'There is nothing one can do when Allah the almighty puts two people side by side.' [...] 'There is nothing new in this world.' [...] I thought of the absent one. I asked with the cry of the hunted beast: 'Modou?'

'Yes, Modou Fall, but, happily he is alive for you, for all of us, thanks be to God. All he has done is to marry a second wife today. We have just come from the mosque in Grand Dakar where the marriage took place.'²²

Ramatoulaye now realises the reason for her husband's frequent absences which he described as job related. The same excuse is also used by Ousmane in *Scarlet Song* when he secretly marries Ouleymatou, as we shall see later. Despite her initial shock at learning about this new marriage, she decides to stay in the marriage with young Binetou.

Ramatoulaye accepts Binetou as her co-wife, and prepares herself to share her husband according to interpretation of Islamic law, but Modou abandons her: 'I lived in a vacuum. And Modou avoided me. Attempts by friends and family to bring him back to the fold proved futile [...] his new-found happiness gradually swallowed up his memory of us. He forgot us.'²³ Therefore it is not polygamy but rather abandonment which triggers

Ramatoulaye's plight. Ramatoulaye does not receive the impartiality and justice which Islam has given to her as her right for polygamous marriage arrangements. Modou has abandoned her and her children: 'I was abandoned: a fluttering leaf that no hand dares to

²² Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, trans. Modupe Bode-Thomas (Harlow: Heinemann, 2008), pp. 37-38.

²³ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 48.

pick up, as my grandmother would have said.’²⁴ It is also the fear of abandonment which causes Ramatoulaye to reject Daouda Dieng’s marriage proposal: ‘Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family.’²⁵ Therefore, focusing on Islam as the only cause of women’s oppression, especially in the context of polygamous marriage, limits our understanding of the various causes of women’s abandonments and desertions.

The Role of Class/Caste in Polygamous Marriages

Class/caste plays a significant role in the breakdown of Aissatou’s marriage. After several years of happy marriage and four sons, Aissatou walks out on her marriage when she discovers that her husband has taken a much younger woman, from an elite feudal blood line, as his second wife, especially selected by his mother. Mawdo’s mother, full of her aristocratic pride, never forgave Mawdo for his marriage to a jeweller’s daughter and vowed to have her only son properly married; that is, from within the royal lineage. But Aissatou, unlike Ramatoulaye, divorces her husband, leaves with her four boys and settles into a good job in Washington, DC. She leaves her husband with the following letter:

I cannot accept what you are offering to me today in place of the happiness we once had. You want to draw a line between heartfelt love and physical love. I say there can be no union of bodies without the heart’s acceptance, however little that may be. If you can procreate without loving, merely to satisfy the pride of your declining mother, then I find you despicable. [...] Your reasoning, which makes a distinction, is unacceptable to me: on one side me, ‘your life, your love, your choice’, on the other, ‘young Nabou to be tolerated for reasons of duty.’²⁶

Aissatou completely refuses to become a part of polygamous marriage arrangement, where according to her ‘heartfelt love’ and ‘physical love’ exist as two separate entities. She

²⁴ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p.55.

²⁵ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p.71.

²⁶ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, pp. 32-33.

further writes in her letter that ‘Mawdo, man is one: greatness and animal fused together. None of his acts is pure charity. None is pure bestiality.’²⁷ The implication here is that Bâ associates ‘pure bestiality’ with men’s polygamous instincts: ‘Thus, to justify himself, he reduced young Nabou to a “plate of food.” Thus, for the sake of “variety”, men are unfaithful to their wives. I was irritated. He was asking me to understand. But to understand what? The supremacy of instinct?’²⁸ This shows that the cause of abandonment is not polygamy as an institution but, rather ‘pure bestiality’ which has no regards for the feelings and emotions of the other person, which in most cases happens to be a woman/wife.

Bâ second novel, *Scarlet Song* (1981), narrates the story of a love affair between two young students, the Senegalese Ousmane and the French Mireille. Ousmane and Mireille marry in France after completing their studies separately, he in Dakar, and she in France, where her father had sent her after learning about the nature of her relationship with Ousmane. Their marriage attracts hostility from their respective parents, as both Ousmane’s and Mireille’s families are against this mixed-race union. Ousmane’s mother, Yaye Khady, is not pleased with her son’s marriage to a foreigner, as Mireille cannot fulfill her duties towards her according to traditional Senegalese cultural codes and expectations. As a result of this strain between Mireille and Yaye Khady, Ousmane falls back on Ouleymatou, his childhood sweetheart, in the name of ‘authenticity’, and will later marry her as his second wife. This polygamous situation will end abysmally with Mireille losing her mind and killing her mixed-race son. The marital problems noted in the case of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are further complicated by racial differences between Ousmane and Mireille. Here again Ousmane is a husband who cheated on his wife and married another woman, Ouleymatou. The money Ousmane is using for his second home with his second wife is from his and Mireille’s joint savings account. This betrayal provokes

²⁷ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 33.

²⁸ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 35.

Mireille, and in a fit of rage she kills their mixed-race child and stabs Ousmane. The issue in these novels is less about Islamic culture and more about men's behaviour, less about faith than infidelity. Obioma Nnaemeka argues that polygamous instincts in Bâ's fictions are not limited to Senegal, but rather 'they are of a global nature', having more to 'do with polygyny as "having many women" than polygamy as "having many wives."' ²⁹ Bâ accepts infidelity in men as a universal phenomenon: 'Black women and men behave the same way as white and yellow. All men are basically polygamous. [...] As for me, frankly, I think, and I do not mean to discourage you – I do not think that men can be sexually faithful.' ³⁰

Mariama Bâ decries the abandonment of responsibility when men secretly take second wives. It is worth noting that the capital/money which the first wife helps to acquire is eventually used against her as in the case of Mireille and Ramatoulaye, when their husbands secure second wives through their abusive use of joint accounts. Bâ denounces careless individuals who use the institution of polygamy as an excuse, and whose wealth makes it feasible for them to exploit the system to their own benefit. ³¹

Mother-in-Law and Polygamy

Barbara Klaw argues that the misconstruing of Islamic principles which are meant to maintain male dominance, often seduced both men and women into certain harmful behaviours. ³² In *So Long a Letter*, the pernicious involvement of older women (mothers-in-law) also plays a significant role in the failure of Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's marriage. In *Scarlet Song*, the failure of the marriage of Ousmane and Mireille is due to Ousmane's

²⁹ Obioma Nnaemeka, 'Urban Spaces, Women's Places: Polygamy as Sign in Mariama Bâ's Novels', in *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 184.

³⁰ Barbara Harrell-Bond, 'An Interview with Mariama Bâ', in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ*, p. 391.

³¹ A. B. Diop, in his study of the organisation of the African family in Dakar, also makes the direct link between prosperity and 'polygamie géographique'. See A. B. Diop, 'L'Organisation de la famille africaine', in *Dakar en devenir*, ed. M. Sankale, L.V. Thomas, and P. Fougeyrollas (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1968), pp. 299-313; see also Obioma Nnaemeka, 'Urban Spaces, Women's Places: Polygamy as Sign in Mariama Bâ's Novels', p. 184; and Ousmane Sembène, *Xala*, trans. Clive Wake (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1976).

³² See Barbara Klaw, 'Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* and Subverting a Mythology of Sex-Based Oppression', *Research in African Literatures*, 31.2 (2000), pp. 132-150 (p. 144).

involvement with Ouleymatou, but the encouragement of his mother, Yaye Khady, is another very important factor.

Katherine Frank argues that it is not possible or even necessary to negotiate and compromise with men. She therefore proposes a complete rejection of patriarchy in all its guises in order to create a world without men, where women would be safe, sane and supportive of one another.³³ However her argument becomes problematic in Bâ's fiction, where women alongside men are also oppressing women who are in relatively weaker positions. Mbye B. Cham observes that Bâ, apart from criticising men, also targets women for perpetuating polygamy for their own private interests.³⁴ According to Cham, Bâ is portraying mothers who become 'victims victimising victims.'³⁵ Ramatoulaye explains: 'His mother would stop by again and again while on her outings, always flanked by different friends, just to show off her son's social success but particularly so that they might see, at close quarters, her supremacy in this beautiful house in which she did not live.'³⁶ Modou's mother takes full credit for his success and wants to boast about her son's accomplishments in the presence of her friends. Ramatoulaye reveals: 'I would receive her with all the respect due to a queen, and she would leave satisfied, especially if her hand closed over the banknote I had carefully placed there.'³⁷ Mawdo Bâ and his wife Aissatou were happily married for many years. Their troubles began when Mawdo's mother started putting pressure on him to marry his very young cousin Nabou. Mawdo's mother, Aunt Nabou, cannot accept Aissatou since she belongs to a lower social class. Aunt Nabou is a staunch believer in the class system: 'She bore a glorious name in the Sine: Diouf. She is a descendant of Bour-Sine. She lived in the past, unaware of the changing world. She clung to old beliefs. Being strongly attached to her privileged origins, she believed firmly that the

³³ See Katherine Frank, 'Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa', *African Literature Today*, 15 (1987), p. 15.

³⁴ See Mbye B. Cham, 'The Female Condition in Africa: A Literary Exploration by Mariama Bâ', *A Current Bibliography in African Literature*, 17.1 (1984 -1985), pp. 25-51.

³⁵ Cham, 'The Female Condition in Africa', p. 42.

³⁶ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 20.

³⁷ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 20.

blood carried with it virtues, and, nodding her head, she would repeat that humble birth would always show in a person's bearing.³⁸ According to traditional Wolof belief, a blacksmith possesses evil powers due to the fact that he handles metal, which signifies hell. Therefore marrying anyone from this social class would be dangerous.³⁹ Therefore to preserve her future generations from the contaminated blood of the lower classes, Aunt Nabou wants her son to leave Aissatou and marry someone from within the royal line. First, she slyly asks her brother to give her one of his daughters, little Nabou: "I need a child beside me [...] to fill my heart. [...] I want this child to be both my legs and my right arm. I am growing old. I will make of this child another me. Since the marriage of my own children, the house has been empty."⁴⁰ She then educates and guides Nabou to be submissive, and knowledgeable in traditional female roles. Afterwards Aunt Nabou deceives Mawdo by lying that young Nabou has been given to him in marriage by his uncle. She further warns that his refusal to obey her will and marry his cousin could kill her: "I will never get over it if you don't take her as your wife. Shame kills faster than disease."⁴¹ As a result of this whole cunning scheme, Aissatou's marriage falls apart. Aunt Nabou is responsible for the breakdown of Aissatou's marriage. However, Aissatou is not the only victim; Aunt Nabou also jeopardises the future of young Nabou for her own selfish gains and false ego. Aunt Nabou teaches young Nabou that 'the first quality in a woman is docility',⁴² and also "'a woman does not need too much education."⁴³

Mothers can deliberately and maliciously sabotage the happiness of other women in a male dominated society. In effect, these 'female patriarchs',⁴⁴ to use Omofolabo Ajayi's

³⁸ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 26.

³⁹ See T. D. Roberts, et al, 'Social Structure', in *Area Handbook for Senegal* (Washington, DC: Foreign Area Studies Division, The American University, 1963), pp. 85-97.

⁴⁰ Bâ, *So long a Letter*, p. 29.

⁴¹ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 30.

⁴² Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 30.

⁴³ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 30.

⁴⁴ See Omofolabo Ajayi, 'Negritude, Feminism, and the Quest for Identity: Re-Reading Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*', in *Teaching African Literatures in Global Literary Economy*, ed. Tuzyline Jita Allan (New York: The Feminist Press, 1997), p. 44; see also Sylvester Mutunda, 'Women Subjugating Women: Re-

expression, help to maintain the status quo. Lack of foresight and indifference on the part of these ‘female patriarchs’ is remarkable. Binetou’s mother is ‘more concerned with putting the pot on the boil than with her daughter’s education.’⁴⁵ She urges her daughter to discontinue her studies in order to marry the wealthy, but aged, Modou, whom Binetou mocks as ‘pot belly, sugar daddy.’⁴⁶ In this selfish scheme, Binetou’s mother damages Ramatoulaye’s home and consequently risks her daughter’s future as an independent and confident woman. Since Binetou leaves her school to marry Modou, she consequently becomes economically dependent on Modou. For Binetou’s mother this marriage is a means to end her poverty and to be impelled into the category of women ““with heavy bracelets” lauded by the *griots*.”⁴⁷ Ramatoulaye feels deceived and humiliated by Modou’s marriage with Binetou. However, she understands that Binetou is a helpless victim, who has been forced into this marriage. Therefore, her resentments are not against Binetou: ‘But what can a child do, faced with a furious mother shouting about her hunger and her thirst to live? Binetou, like many others, was a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence.’⁴⁸ Here, the mother-daughter relationship is fractured not only by patriarchal social structures, but also grievous economic imbalances. Ramatoulaye suggests that Binetou is a victim of her vicious but poor mother.

In *Scarlet Song*, Bâ also portrays female characters who are actively involved in the persecution and marginalisation of other females. After their marriage in Paris, both Mireille and Ousmane return to Senegal. At the beginning, they are happy and close to each. However, Yaye Khady is not pleased that her son has married a woman of his own choice, and who is also white. Her confrontational attitude towards Mireille makes it clear that she is not welcome in Yaye Khady’s home. On the contrary, her husband, Djibril

Reading Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, *Ufahamu: African Studies Journal*, 33 (2007), pp. 90-125.

⁴⁵ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 50.

⁴⁶ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 40.

⁴⁷ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 52.

⁴⁸ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, pp. 40-41.

Gueye, decides to give his daughter-in-law a fair chance. According to Yaye Khady, Mireille can never fulfill the role of a traditional Senegalese daughter-in-law: “‘A *Toubab* can’t be a proper daughter-in-law. She’ll only have eyes for her man. We’ll mean nothing to her. And I who dreamt of a daughter-in-law who’d live here and relieve me of the domestic work by taking over the management of the house, and now I’m faced with a woman who’s going to take my son away from me. I shall die on my feet, in the kitchen.’”⁴⁹ Yaye Khady turns her son against Mireille (maligning her race) to dissolve the marriage, preparing the ground for an intra-racial union instead.

Apart from her skin colour, there are many other reasons for ostracising Mireille. Mireille is an intelligent independent woman, who is equal to Ousmane in education. However, she is not versed in the intricacies of Senegalese tradition, especially the responsibilities required of a daughter-in-law towards her in-laws, and particularly towards her mother-in-law. In this context, Mireille’s rival Ouleymatou, is at an advantage. She is Senegalese, and was raised in a traditional setting. She is hardly educated but knows how to maneuver the family politics for her own benefit. According to Yaye Khady, black and white daughters-in-law are diametrically opposed. She asserts:

A black woman knows and accepts the mother-in-law’s rights. She enters the home with the intention of relieving the older woman. The daughter-in-law cocoons her husband’s mother in a nest of respect and repose. Acting according to unspoken and undisputed principles, the mother-in-law gives her orders, supervises, makes her demands. She appropriates the greater part of her son’s earnings. She is concerned with the running of his household and has her say in the upbringing of her grandchildren. . .⁵⁰

On the other hand:

⁴⁹ Mariama Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (Harlow: Longman, 1986), p. 66.

⁵⁰ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 72.

‘A white woman does not enrich a family. She impoverishes it by undermining its unity. She can’t be integrated into the community. She keeps herself apart, dragging her husband after her. Has anyone ever seen a white woman pounding millet or fetching buckets of water? On the contrary, the white woman exploits others who have to do the jobs for her that she is not used to doing! [...] The white woman manipulates her husband like a puppet. Her husband remains her property. She alone controls her household and all the income is turned to her benefit alone. Nothing goes to her husband’s family.’⁵¹

This shows that it is not simply an issue of Mireille’s race and nationality. I concur with Sylvester Mutunda, who argues that the main issue here is of a woman’s familial control.⁵² Ousmane’s mother misuses her power and privileges in order to get rid of Mireille. Juliana Nfa-Abbeyi contends that ‘Yaye Khady assumes that a Senegalese daughter-in-law would automatically fit into a predetermined sexual division of labor – one that directs another to relieve her domestic duties, thus rewarding her for her numerous years of motherhood and childbearing. Yaye Khady thinks first of herself and her position, and these selfish feelings blind her from developing any constructive or meaningful relationship with Mireille.’⁵³ Yaye Khady does not make any effort to integrate Mireille into Senegalese society and culture; instead she wages against the younger woman a domestic campaign of aggression and intimidation: ‘out of spite or habit, [Yaye Khady] prepared extremely hot, peppery dishes which were torture to Mireille. They made her nose run, prevented her from swallowing and for days on end she had to live on fruit.’⁵⁴ She intrudes on the couple’s privacy every Sunday morning by walking straight into their bedroom without knocking and, claims that the white woman, with her voracious love of sex, is slowly killing her son.

⁵¹ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 73.

⁵² Mutunda, ‘Women Subjugating Women’, p. 109.

⁵³ Juliana Makuchi Nfa-Abeniyi, ‘Women Redefining Difference: Mariama Bâ, Miriam Tlali, and Bessie Head’, in *Gender in African Women’s Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Differences* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 116.

⁵⁴ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 81.

Yaye Khady, according to Theodora A. Ezeigbo, seems to be ‘the most pernicious and crafty of these objectionable female kill joys. Her role in her son’s home is that of an intruder and a plunderer.’⁵⁵

The narrator of *Scarlet Song* tells us: ‘Not for one moment did Yaye Khady spare a thought for the other mother who, for all that she was white, had also given birth, loved and hoped. [...] She was wrecked with suffering too, like Yaye Khady; it hurt where the umbilical cord had been severed; she too awoke to grief-stricken dawns. Yaye Khady cared little for the torment of that mother.’⁵⁶ This collusion of women with men against other women is condemned by Ramatoulaye’s daughter, Daba: ‘How can a woman sap the happiness of another?’⁵⁷ Soukeyna also impugns her mother, Yaye Khady, for not helping Mireille to integrate into Senegalese family structure: “‘By your selfishness you’re driving Ousmane to eventual disaster; and simultaneously, you’re killing another woman’s daughter, as Mireille also has a mother. I am completely opposed to my brother’s second marriage. [...] You reject her without even knowing her. Why? Because she is white . . . Her colour is the only reason you’ve got for hating her. I can’t see anything else you can have against her.’”⁵⁸ The role of mother-in-law has a very significant and powerful status in Senegalese culture. Bâ exposes the nature and extent of such authority and shows with specific examples the ways in which a mother often misuses her domestic power and status. Bâ challenges the common myth that the ideological figure of the ‘mother’ is a flawless superhuman. However, Mbye B. Cham proposes that the criticism of mothers-in-law in Bâ’s work should not be misconstrued as anti-tradition: ‘[Bâ] is indicting the misuse of the privileges of tradition and of the institution of mother-in-law, in particular, for personal profit at the expense of the well-being of the children-in-law. [...] Tante Nabou

⁵⁵ Theodora A. Ezeigbo, ‘Women’s Empowerment and National Integration: Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* and Warner-Vieyra’s *Juletane*’, in *Current Trends in Literature and Language Studies in West Africa*, ed. Ernest N. Emenyonu and Charles E. Nnolin (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 1994), p. 66.

⁵⁶ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 74.

⁵⁷ Bâ, *So long a Letter*, p. 74.

⁵⁸ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, pp. 152-153.

and Yaye Khady are prisoners of canons of tradition considered by Mariama Bâ to be anachronistic and inimical to socio-economic transformation.⁵⁹ What Mariama Bâ achieves in her texts is not a wholesale repudiation of traditional lore but rather a disavowal of those unjust 'practices', 'customs', and 'archaic mores' which impair or arrest social progress and development.⁶⁰

The Role of Colonial History and Racism in Marital Relationships

The history of colonisation has an important part to play in Mireille and Ousmane's relationship. Ousmane belongs to the community which was colonized, while Mireille's community were Ousmane's colonisers. Colonial history is also crucial in making Ousmane fiercely faithful to his people: 'But before entering into any agreement, he would make it quite clear he would never renounce his black identity. He would make it a condition that Mireille should first convert to Islam.'⁶¹ Mireille, on the other hand, cannot relate to her own community which has a major part in the cultural and economic exploitation of other countries: "'You're still the same old coloniser, just disguised as humanitarian, still playing your own game, which is simply and solely to exploit this country. But I'm not playing your game; I'm on the other side, and I'm not going back on that, you understand. . . .'"⁶² Therefore, alongside issues of race and the interference of an unsympathetic mother-in-law, colonial history also affects Mireille and Ousmane's marriage. Jeanette Treiber argues that the conflict between Mireille and Ousmane has a wider context: 'Cultural difference caused by differing socio-historical experience.'⁶³ According to Treiber, Mireille and Ousmane do not understand this fundamental difference between them, and as a result their relationship increasingly suggests a battle in which

⁵⁹ Cham, 'Contemporary Society and the Female Imagination', pp. 94-97.

⁶⁰ See Bâ, 'The Political Function of Written African Literatures', p. 413.

⁶¹ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 39.

⁶² Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 28.

⁶³ Jeanette Treiber, 'Feminism and Identity Politics: Mariama Bâ's *Un chant écarlate*', *Research in African Literatures*, 27.4 (1996), p. 114.

‘each attempts to assert his or her power.’⁶⁴ This is problematic given that Mireille is not involved in any kind of power struggle with her husband. What is more significant here is that she has no moral support from anywhere: her parents have abandoned her, Ousmane is no longer interested in her, and her mother-in-law is doing her best to “turn Mireille into her slave.”⁶⁵ In Irene D’Almeida’s words, ‘all the choices in *Un chant écarlate* converge to bring about Mireille’s destruction.’⁶⁶ Against this background of frustration, impasse and hostility she still strives to foster a culture of tolerance and respect for difference in her domestic milieu: ‘That was the type of home that Mireille dreamed of! Between the two extremes, it would have been easy for Ousmane to create such a home, since his wife, while retaining her own personality, did not attempt to make him her slave. *But, when all was said and done, was Ousmane really interested in the peace and equilibrium of his household?*’⁶⁷ (emphasis added)

The traditionalist friends of Ousmane reject Mireille on the grounds of her skin colour, and scorn the very notion of a ‘mixed marriage’: “‘A woman’s only a woman, tall or short, black or white. So why look for one outside your own world? Marriage is a thorny enough problem as it is. Why create more difficulties?’” [...] Each one of them felt the wife’s hostility. From her sullen expression, her obstinate silence. But what did that matter? “Ousmane is the master of the house!” “Ousmane is the voice that counts.”⁶⁸ Ousmane’s liberal friends, on the other hand, trace racism in his behaviour: “‘How can *you*, Ousmane, betray trust? I hardly know you in your new guise. [...] Besides, what do you reproach your wife with? Her colour? Her mentality? The same grievances that her father had against you? Ridiculous! You are the racist now. . . .’”⁶⁹ However at this point

⁶⁴ Treiber, ‘Feminism and Identity Politics’, p. 115.

⁶⁵ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 152.

⁶⁶ Irene Assiba D’Almeida, ‘The Concept of Choice in Mariama Bâ’s Fiction’, in *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Ann Adams Graves (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986), p. 170.

⁶⁷ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 123.

⁶⁸ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 86.

⁶⁹ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, pp. 138-139.

Ousmane is beyond recovery: ‘Ousmane Gueye, the uncompromising disciple of “Negritude”, who used to advise them to “open up”, is now turning in on himself, with the excuse of not betraying “his roots!”’⁷⁰ Ousmane’s resolve to uphold and affirm ‘his roots’ ends in the glorification of African women, and at this crucial moment Ouleymatou becomes his so-called saviour:

Ouleymatou had become his true soulmate, the woman in whom he recognized the extension of himself. She was, as Mabo Dialli so rightly sang, at one and the same time his roots, his stock, his growth, his flowering. They were linked by their childhood, spent in the maze of dusty streets. Most important, they were linked by their common origins: the same ancestors, the same skies. The same soil! The same tradition! Their souls were impregnated with the sap of the same customs. They were excited by the same causes. Neither Ousmane nor Ouleymatou could disclaim this common essence without distorting their very natures.⁷¹

But the woman whom Ousmane is confusing with Africa is seducing him not because she loves him, but because she is more interested in his money. The women in Ouleymatou’s compound also become her accomplices in this venture. Mother Fatima, the senior wife, known for her piety and strict adherence to Islamic teachings and beliefs, also encourages the secret marriage between Ousmane and Ouleymatou. Through this indirect relationship between greed (Ouleymatou) and negritude (Ousmane), Bâ implies that blind faithfulness and uncritical adherence to tradition or to an ideology can destroy both familial and social ties.

⁷⁰ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 135.

⁷¹ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 121.

The narrator of *Scarlet Song* indicts those minds that are ‘fossilized by the antiquated ideas of the past.’⁷² Monsieur Jean de La Vallée’s reaction to Mireille’s letter in which she announced her marriage with Ousmane displays blatant racism:

He was haunted by the memory of the blacks he had formerly employed as domestic servants. [...] What about the ones he had had dealings with in the course of his diplomatic missions? ‘Even more ridiculous with their affected manners and their panting to catch up with generations of civilization! They’re primitive people! They behave like primitives!’ And to think that his daughter would land up in these crude hands.

‘What a mess!’⁷³

Ousmane, who was an idealist at the outset and believed in the credo of negritude, “‘returning to your roots and keeping the way open,’”⁷⁴ is led to contradict his own principles towards the end of the novel. Gradually negritude becomes his rigid religion which does not permit any compromise or negotiation. According to Adele King, ‘[n]egritude should not be perverted into racism.’⁷⁵ However, the exact opposite of this happens in the novel and leads to the ultimate tragedy: ‘Africans think of white women who marry them as trash; European women think of Africans as treacherous seducers who will steal their belongings. Ousmane’s mother thinks white people are abnormal; Mireille’s father thinks Africans are primitive. Mireille the idealist goes mad,’⁷⁶ and kills her mixed-race son who has no place in this colour-conscious world, which very quickly ‘*will teach*

⁷² Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 36.

⁷³ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 76.

⁷⁴ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 47.

⁷⁵ Adele King, ‘The Personal and the Political in the Work of Mariama Bâ’, *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*, 18.2 (1994), p. 185.

⁷⁶ King, ‘The Personal and the Political in the Work of Mariama Bâ’, p. 185.

*you what colour your girlfriend is. Before even you kiss chase her, you will think of her colour first.*⁷⁷

The Politics of Feminism in Bâ's Fiction

Mariama Bâ explores women's marginalised status and struggles against the patriarchal structures of contemporary Senegalese society. In the words of African critic Abiola Irele, Bâ's work is 'a testimony of the female condition in Africa, while giving that testimony a true imaginative depth.'⁷⁸ Bâ's fiction has provoked both keen appreciation and stinging criticism. An important though largely unremarked facet of both positive and negative appraisals is the assumption that the women who contest polygamy or demand greater autonomy and respect are doing so under the influence of western ideals of feminism. What these reductive assessments overlook is Bâ's subtle and searching negotiation between tradition and modernity. Her incisive responses to the cultural phenomena and institutions of 'marriage', 'mother-in-law' and 'negritude' are by no means anti-African or anti-Islam. Rather her fictional explorations can be measured against Femi Ojo-Ade's observation on *So Long a Letter*: 'Bâ's feminism, especially as expressed by Aissatou the interpreter, smacks of Beauvoirism; the traditional marriage is a deterrent to woman's promise. No marriage. No attachment. No master. The home becomes a transitory institution. Love is a passing sentiment secondary to other elements of existence.'⁷⁹ Bâ's feminism does not criticise marriage and family, but rather condemns the exploitation of these institutions for male privilege. Bâ's particular brand of feminism supports divorce as a legitimate choice and civil/Islamic right for Senegalese women. However, Ojo-Ade maintains that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou live their lives on borrowed training and thoughts; as a result 'Aissatou remains what she has been: a sad slave, a loveless loser.'⁸⁰ It is revealing to set this article against Florence Stratton's appreciation of Aissatou's

⁷⁷ Buchi Emecheta, *In the Ditch* (London & New York: Allison and Busby, 1972), p. 107.

⁷⁸ Abiola Irele, 'Review of *Une si longue lettre*', *African Book Publishing Record*, 6.2 (1980), p. 108.

⁷⁹ Femi Ojo-Ade, 'Still a Victim? Mariama Bâ's *Une si Longue Lettre*', *African Literature Today*, 12 (1982), p. 84.

⁸⁰ Ojo-Ade, 'Still a Victim?', p. 78.

decision to divorce her husband and calls it an assertion of herself in the world. However, at the same time she deplores Ramatoulaye's decision to stay in her marriage, calling her 'emotionally and sexually paralyzed.'⁸¹ Stratton concludes that 'by having her heroine tell her story while literally confined in the house of death, Bâ tells the tale of the living death of every woman who is unable to break out of that conditioning. In effect, Ramatoulaye mourns her own demise.'⁸²

It appears that Femi Oje-Ade understands *So Long a Letter* in the context of tradition and nationalism and therefore Aissatou who seeks divorce is a 'loser.' Florence Stratton and others read the novel in the context of western feminism and therefore Ramatoulaye's decision to stay in the marriage makes her a 'loser.' Before making any judgments about 'winner' and 'loser' in this feminist battle it is necessary to determine first what kind of feminism we are talking about. Bâ identifies the damaging role skewed traditions and unjust laws play in the development and the maintenance of chauvinistic attitudes. Bâ's protagonists are caught within and chafe against the specific cultural and material realities of their society. The injurious and destructive effects of sexism seem to be more or less the same all over the world, and thus sexism must be challenged globally. However, the means by which they are produced varies across cultures, and these operational differences determine and inflect how feminist struggles ought to be conducted.⁸³ Therefore the application of western feminist ideas and ideals on African

⁸¹ Florence Stratton, 'The Shallow Grave: Archetypes of Female Experience in African Fiction', *Research in African Literatures*, 19.2 (1988), p. 161; Helen Chukwuma supports Stratton's argument and asserts that Aissatou's response is typically feminist, while 'Ramatoulaye's typically female, sentimental, and naïve.' Chukwuma reprimands Ramatoulaye for not having 'the guts and courage of feminism.' See Helen Chukwuma, 'Voices and Choices: The Feminist Dilemma in Four African Novels', in *Feminism in African Literature: Essays on Criticism*, ed. Helen Chukwuma (Enugu: New Generation Books, 1994), p. 222; Emmanuel Obiechina contends that a true feminist should terminate a relationship which has become full of humiliation and agonies, and in this context Aissatou is a 'true feminist', but Ramatoulaye is 'not and has never been a feminist.' See Emmanuel Obiechina, 'Feminine Perspectives in Selected African Novels', in *Nwayibu: Womanbeing and African Literature*, ed. Phanuel Egejuru and Ketu Katrak (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1997), pp. 39-40.

⁸² Stratton, 'The Shallow Grave', p. 166.

⁸³ See E. Imafedia Okhamafe, 'African feminism(s) and the Question of Marital and Non-Marital Loneliness and Intimacy', *Sage*, 6.1 (1989), pp. 33-39 (p. 39).

women and their realities will not only lead to a western-African clash, but will also produce misrepresentations.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that ‘a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group [...] produces the image of an “average third -world woman.”’⁸⁴ ‘This average third world woman’, according to Mohanty, ‘leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family oriented, victimised etc.). [...] This is in contrast to the self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions.’⁸⁵ According to Mohanty she is not challenging the universal groupings of women for explanatory reasons: ‘Women from the continent of Africa can be descriptively characterized as “Women of Africa.” It is when “Women of Africa” becomes a homogeneous sociological group characterized by common dependencies or powerlessness (or even strengths) that problems arise.’⁸⁶ And therefore when we read *So Long a Letter* ‘Under Western Eyes’ we situate Aissatou’s action as heroic and ultimately the appropriate choice, and Ramatoulaye’s decision to stay with a polygamous partner becomes problematic. Through the marital choices of Aissatou and Ramatoulaye, the novel subverts and then contrasts the common assumption in the west regarding polygamy – namely, that it cannot be a wise choice for any self-aware, enlightened woman. Ramatoulaye proves otherwise. Therefore, the novel attests to my observation that monogamy is not an inherently feminist viewpoint; feminists must embrace all possible ways of life if the woman under scrutiny is happy in her choices. D’Almeida declares that, ‘it is important to focus on the choices made by female characters in *So Long a Letter*. [...] Aissatou and Ramatoulaye have made different choices in similar

⁸⁴ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’, in *Feminist Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 53.

⁸⁵ Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes’, p. 53.

⁸⁶ Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes’, pp. 53-55.

situations. However, what is important is that the choices have been made.’⁸⁷ It is Ramatoulaye’s choice to stay in a polygamous marriage, and more importantly, no one has forced her to stay with Modou. After the death of Modou, Ramatoulaye chooses not to marry again. The rejection of marriage proposals from Daouda and Modou’s brother Tasmir, earns her the reputation of “lioness” or “mad woman”⁸⁸ in town, which manifests Ramatoulaye’s strength and ability to take decisions independent of the pressures of Senegalese society.

However, Ramatoulaye’s decision to stay in a polygamous marriage is not an easy choice, but rather a long and stressful battle. She talks about her difficult recovery in the following lines: ‘I was surviving. In addition to my former duties, I took over Modou’s as well. [...] I survived. I overcame my shyness at going alone to cinemas; I would take a seat with less and less embarrassment as the months went by.’⁸⁹ This reflects Ramatoulaye’s fighting spirit, and her courage and ability to enter into public space without any male partner. For Mildred Mortimer, these developments in Ramatoulaye’s life demonstrate her adventurous independence of mind, and augur her final transformation.⁹⁰ Ramatoulaye’s entry into the public sphere as a single woman is a transgression of carefully policed gender boundaries. Valerie Orlando postulates that ‘a woman doubts her place with regard to the public sphere from the beginning, even deep down in her sub-conscious. Once out on the liminal edges of her society, she either fights for, agrees with, or questions her role within the sociocultural boundaries of her community.’⁹¹ Ramatoulaye’s entry into the

⁸⁷ D’Almeida, ‘The Concept of Choice in Mariama Bâ’s Fiction’, pp. 162, 171.

⁸⁸ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 73.

⁸⁹ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, pp. 53-54.

⁹⁰ See Mildred Mortimer, ‘Enclosure/Disclosure in Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre*’, *The French Review*, 64.1 (1990), p. 74.

⁹¹ Valerie Orlando, ‘Introduction: Writing New H(er)stories for Francophone Women of Africa and the Caribbean’, in *Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls: Seeking Subjecthood Through Madness in Francophone Women’s Writings of Africa and the Caribbean* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2003), p. 19; Gayatri Spivak argues that ‘politics’, ‘power’, ‘economics’, and ‘intellectual arenas’ represent the public sector. By contrast, ‘[t]he emotional, sexual, and domestic are the private sector,’ the domain which is mostly associated with women. According to Spivak when women breach these private/public boundaries then they threaten the phallographic order. See Gayatri Spivak, ‘Explanation and Culture: Marginalia’, in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Culture and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 103.

public sphere, which parallels and informs her active participation in the private sphere, is Mariama Bâ's way of negotiating modernity and tradition. Therefore when Ramatoulaye becomes aware of her daughter's pregnancy outside marriage, she decides to protect her daughter in support of better future: 'Her life and her future were at stake, and these were powerful considerations, overriding all taboos and assuming greater importance in my heart and in my mind.'⁹² Here Ramatoulaye is more focused on the future than the past: 'The life that fluttered in her was questioning me. It was eager to blossom. It vibrated, demanding protection.'⁹³ Ramatoulaye is again making a vital choice here, which is crucial for her family. This choice at the end of the novel is offered in defiance of those chauvinistic traditions that accord different moral codes to men and women. According to Mary Jane Androne, 'what Ramatoulaye spells out in rehearsing the events, decisions, crises and joys of her life is what it means to live a feminist life that can tolerate contradictions, overcome challenges, endure loss and find fulfillment in the interstices of an imperfect society as she struggles to raise her children, work at her profession and participate in the life of the community.'⁹⁴ Ramatoulaye's ability to make independent choices, within the conservative climate of Senegalese society, demonstrates that significant social revolutions may even there unfold successfully from within. I must stress here that Bâ's characters do not indiscriminately reject their African traditions in the name of modernity, but only those which are obstructing the progress of both male and female members of Senegalese society.

According to Angelita Reyes, 'Feminism has different meanings for women whose societies have been influenced by colonialism, nineteenth century missionary Christianity,

⁹² Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 87.

⁹³ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 87.

⁹⁴ Mary Jane Androne, 'The Collective Spirit of Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*', in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ*, p. 47.

Islam and indigenous beliefs.’⁹⁵ Uzo Esonwanne argues that *So Long a Letter* ‘while staying within Islamic culture, works to subvert and destabilise certain dichotomies rooted in race, age, sex and culture.’⁹⁶ Carole Boyce Davies contends that African feminism is a hybrid which combines both African and feminist concerns. According to Davies:

[African feminism] is not antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain silent aspects of women’s subjugation which differ from generalised oppression of all African peoples, [...] examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women and rejects those which work to their detriment and does not simply import Western women agendas [...] [and] looks at traditional and contemporary avenues of choices for women.⁹⁷

Mariama Bâ is recommending a similar kind of feminism: ‘What women are searching for is not so much to destroy everything from the past. But the man must abandon a part of his power, his privileges from the past.’⁹⁸ I disagree with Obioma Nnaemeka when she suggests that Bâ evinces a radical and enigmatic ambivalence towards feminist tenets.⁹⁹ Bâ is proud of her African heritage but at the same time, she refines a reformist agenda by subjecting the indigenous structures of Senegalese society to searching critique.

Ramatoulaye is aware of the societal limitations constraining her struggle against parochial traditions: ‘I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquests difficult: social constraints are ever-present, and male egoism resists.’¹⁰⁰ However the

⁹⁵ Angelita Reyes, ‘The Epistolary Voice and Voices of Indigenous Feminism in Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre*’, in *Moving Beyond Boundaries: Black Women’s Diaspora*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 210.

⁹⁶ Uzo Esonwanne, ‘Enlightenment Epistemology and Aesthetic Cognition: Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*’, in *The Politics of (M)Othering*, p. 83.

⁹⁷ Carole Boyce Davies, ‘Introduction: Feminist Consciousness and African Literary Criticism’, in *Ngambika*, pp. 9-10.

⁹⁸ Harrell-Bond, ‘An Interview with Mariama Bâ’, p. 390.

⁹⁹ See Obioma Nnaemeka, ‘Mariama Bâ: Parallels, Convergence and Interior Space’, in *The Growth of African Literature: Twenty-Five Years After Dakar and Fourah Bay*, ed. Edris Makward, Thelma Ravell-Pinto, and Aliko Songolo (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998), p. 207.

¹⁰⁰ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 93.

comment that '[her] heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows'¹⁰¹ reveals the possibility of success against blinkered traditions within the Senegalese cultural milieu.

Gail Chester and Sigrid Nielson argue that there is a direct link between writing and women's liberation movements: 'Writing is essential to women's struggle for liberation from second-class status, poverty and enforced silence. Feminism, literacy and education for women are closely linked world-wide.'¹⁰² Chester and Nielson further contend that '[l]earning to organise thoughts on paper, to express feelings, to respond to others, is an enormous extension of women's power. It allows for communication over time as well as distance.'¹⁰³ Ramatoulaye's letter gives her the power to question the fundamental yet prejudiced traditions of her society; it enables her to develop a politically conscious identity, which allows her to see fundamental errors in her society and to raise her voice against them: "'Nearly twenty years of independence! When will we have the first female minister involved in the decisions concerning the development of our country? [...] when will education be decided for children on the basis not of sex but of talent?'"¹⁰⁴ Mildred Mortimer reads 'the act of writing as a process of disclosure that promotes discovery and [...] clearly reinforces female bonding.'¹⁰⁵ Christopher Miller proposes that although 'the moment of closure remains outside the scope of the novel [...] the symbolic act of handing over this text to a friend seems to reinforce the positive image of literature that Bâ promotes: the text we are reading is a tangible sign of the link between the two women,

¹⁰¹ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 93.

¹⁰² Gail Chester, Sigrid Nielson, 'Introduction: Writing as a Feminist', in *In Other Words: Writing as a Feminist*, ed. Gail Chester and Sigrid Nielson (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 9; Chandra Mohanty also encourages this view of writing: 'the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicised consciousness and self-identity. Writing often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. It becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself.' See Chandra Mohanty, 'Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism', in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indian UP, 1991), p. 34.

¹⁰³ Chester, Nielson, 'Introduction', in *In Other Words*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁴ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, pp. 63-64.

¹⁰⁵ Mortimer, 'Enclosure/Disclosure in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*', p. 76.

that link can lead to others.’¹⁰⁶ Ramatoulaye’s letter postulates that ‘much dismantling [is] needed to introduce modernity within our traditions.’¹⁰⁷ Ramatoulaye’s letter to Aissatou is a declaration and symbol of her politics of identity in post-independence Senegal. The politics of gender identity in Ramatoulaye’s letter argues for change to the infrastructure of Senegalese society, emphasising education as a means to create better socio-political circumstances for women. Ramatoulaye’s radical letter is rooted in the Senegalese cultural milieu, and thus will also encourage other Senegalese women in their fight against patriarchal values, callous interpretations of Islam, and western hegemony over feminist ideals. Therefore, according to Lisa Boyd, when we imagine the meeting of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou at the end of the novel, it is not the meeting of ‘[w]estern modernism and African traditionalism, for those boundaries [...] are no longer valid. They have moved beyond,’¹⁰⁸ in a new direction that recognises that ‘modernity and traditionalism are here to stay, and strange bedfellows as they may seem, they are destined to share the present for all eternity.’¹⁰⁹ Bâ’s Ramatoulaye is living her life and making her choices within the framework of her community, and it is important to keep in mind the Senegalese cultural context when analysing Bâ’s work. Toni Morrison is useful in understanding Ramatoulaye’s story. According to Morrison, black people have a story to tell and their story needs to be heard.¹¹⁰ However, according to Morrison, in order to comprehend these stories some pioneering work is required in literary criticism.¹¹¹ The point about perspective can be seen when Morrison speaks about critics’ lack of cultural training when they analyse her own work:

¹⁰⁶ Christopher Miller, ‘Senegalese Women Writers, Silence, and Letters: Before the Canon’s Roar’, in *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 289.

¹⁰⁷ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 19.

¹⁰⁸ Lisa Boyd, ‘“To be a Woman! To Live the Life of a Woman”: The Transformation of Feminism in Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*’, in *Camel Tracks: Critical Perspectives on Senegalese Literature*, ed. Debra Boud-Buggs and Joyce Hope Scott (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), p. 269.

¹⁰⁹ Jean-Marie Volet, ‘Tradition and Modernity are Here to Stay: An Analysis of Francophone African Women’s Writings Published in 1997-98’, *Research in African Literatures*, 30.2 (1999), p. 192.

¹¹⁰ Toni Morrison, Nellie McKay, ‘An Interview with Toni Morrison’, *Comparative Literature*, 24.4 (1983), p. 427.

¹¹¹ Morrison, McKay, ‘An Interview with Toni Morrison’, p. 426.

Critics of my work have often left something to be desired, in my mind, because they don't always evolve out of the culture, the world, the given quality out of which I write. Other kinds of structures are imposed on my works, and therefore they are either praised or dismissed on the basis of something that I have no interest in whatever, which is writing a novel according to some structure that comes out of a different culture. I am trying very hard to use the characteristics of the art form that I know best, and to succeed or fail on those criteria rather than on some other criteria. I tend not to explain things very much, but I long for a critic who will know what I mean. [...] I am yearning for someone to see such things – to see what the structures are, what the moorings are, where the anchors are that support my writings.¹¹²

Ramatoulaye's letter, which she calls her 'prop,'¹¹³ argues for female independence within the cultural context of her community. These indigenous feminist perspectives are fighting against biased customs and values which are denying women their humanity. According to Mariama Bâ, '[t]he nostalgic hymns dedicated to the African mother, confused by men in their anguish, are no longer satisfying to us.'¹¹⁴ Therefore this institution of motherhood needs modification. The fact that Aissatou is able to succeed on her own and raise her sons in a comfortable fashion indicates that being a good mother does not mean sacrificing one's own self-respect and happiness as Nnu Ego does in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979).

'Bâ's texts suggest', according to Nicki Hitchcott, 'that woman alone cannot resist the historically sanctioned practices of patriarchy, for such strength comes from the collective memory of the shared experiences of women. The friendship between

¹¹² Morrison, McKay, 'An Interview with Toni Morrison', p. 425.

¹¹³ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ Bâ, 'The Political Function of Written African Literatures', p. 416.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou stands as a model of such solidarity.’¹¹⁵ Female bonding and friendship are crucial for Bâ as effective strategies to combat oppressive or stifling socio-cultural codes. The camaraderie between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou is based on trust and understanding, which, despite their having different views on polygamy, proves to be a source of consolation and reassurance during their difficult times. Ramatoulaye declares that ‘[f]riendship has splendours that love knows not. [...] Friendship resists time. [...] It has heights unknown to love.’¹¹⁶ In an interview Bâ asserts that:

this book (*So Long a Letter*) [...] often described as a ‘cry from the heart’, is indeed a cry from the heart of all women everywhere. It is first a cry from the heart of Senegalese women, because it talks about the problems of Senegalese women, of Muslim women, women constrained by religion and other social constraints that weigh them down. But, it is also a cry that can symbolise the cry of women everywhere. [...] their cry will not be exactly the same as ours – we have not all got the same problems – but, there is a fundamental unity in all of our sufferings and in our desire for liberation and in our desire to cut off the chains which date from antiquity.¹¹⁷

Now ‘this cry from the heart’ recognises difference and at the same time offers a solution through Rosalie, an important character in *Scarlet Song*, who embodies the view that ‘[w]omen should stick together.’¹¹⁸ Mary Jane Androne observes that the inclusion of the stories of the other women (Aissatou and Jacqueline) accentuates the ‘collective spirit of this letter.’¹¹⁹ Androne contends that ‘these narratives suggest that Ramatoulaye’s well-being and happiness are intricately connected with the lives of other women – her

¹¹⁵ Nicki Hitchcott, “‘Confidently Feminine?’ Sexual Role-Play in the Novels of Mariama Bâ”, in *African Francophone Writing: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Laila Ibnlfassi and Nicki Hitchcott (Oxford: Berg, 1996), p.152.

¹¹⁶ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 56.

¹¹⁷ Harrell-Bond, ‘An Interview with Mariama Bâ’, pp. 396-397.

¹¹⁸ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 136.

¹¹⁹ Androne, ‘The Collective Spirit of Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*’, p. 46.

daughters, friends and female relatives.’¹²⁰ In her second book Bâ also underscores sympathetic camaraderie over amatory love: ‘Friendship has a more constant code of behaviour than that of love. Friendship can be stronger than the affection born of blood-ties.’¹²¹ There is no doubt that the ultimate cause of Mireille’s suffering is the betrayal of her husband, but Bâ also places responsibility for Mireille’s ostracism and madness on an older generation of females. The female bonding and amity which sustain both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou in their difficult emotional times is absent in *Scarlet Song*. Indeed, its absence subsequently leads to the catastrophe that engulfs Mireille and her son.

However, Bâ’s feminism does not encourage female bonding or sisterhood at the expense of family and marriage. Ramatoulaye declares that despite her husband’s betrayal, she remains ‘persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman. [...] To love one another! If only each partner could move sincerely towards the other!’¹²² Ramatoulaye’s daughter Daba and her husband Abou epitomise the tender and equal companionship which Ramatoulaye yearns for: ‘I sense the tenderness growing between this young couple. [...] They identify with each other, discuss everything so as to find a compromise.’¹²³ Men and women are complementary. Femininity and masculinity are not qualities signifying inferiority and superiority. Acceptance of tradition does not mean acquiescence to oppressive frameworks and unjust legislation: ‘It means to sow the seed of transformation in the brutalized postcolonial soil.’¹²⁴ Bâ compares the harmony of couples to the harmony of the nation: ‘The success of the family is born of a couple’s harmony, as the harmony of the multiple instruments creates a pleasant symphony. The nation is made up of all the families, rich or poor, united or separated, aware or unaware.

¹²⁰ Androne, ‘The Collective Spirit of Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*’, p. 46.

¹²¹ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 152.

¹²² Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, pp. 93-94.

¹²³ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 77.

¹²⁴ Dorothy Davis Wills, ‘Economic Violence in Postcolonial Senegal: Noisy Silence in Novels by Mariama Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall’, in *Violence, Silence and Anger: Women’s Writing as Transgression*, ed. Deirdre Lashgari (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 1995), p. 169.

The success of a nation therefore depends inevitably on the family.’¹²⁵ Bâ is arguing for a free and fair society, which treats all its citizens with respect and justice, and enables itself to engage in ‘one grand dialogue!’¹²⁶ of moderation. With this voice of moderation and negotiation, there are also strong emotions: ‘We are almost ashamed to find love and sentiment. We believe that the way to be is rational and logical, not to admit to any beating of the heart. I believe that what made my book so successful was that it put sentiment, emotion, back into its place.’¹²⁷ Bâ speaks of ‘love that knew no frontiers,’¹²⁸ of harmony between men and women, tradition and modernity and among all races. The closing line of *So Long a Letter*, ‘[t]oo bad for me if once again I have to write you so long a letter,’¹²⁹ shows Bâ’s optimism that in spite of all the prejudices and injustices in society there is still hope: ‘In spite of all the other things, in spite of wars, in spite of battles for pieces of land, in spite of all that, we can still have hope for humanity. Humans can still be faithful to human ideals.’¹³⁰ Bâ’s dedication of *So Long a Letter* ‘[t]o all women and to men of good will’ manifests her recognition of the important role which men can play in bringing about positive change in Senegalese culture. The strategy of including men alongside women in the interests of social progress is also present in the work of Buchi Emecheta. However, the lack of positive male characters in Bâ’s and Emecheta’s work suggests that their social vision for their respective societies will be a long and difficult process.

¹²⁵ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 94.

¹²⁶ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 135.

¹²⁷ Harrell-Bond, ‘An Interview with Mariama Bâ’, p. 389.

¹²⁸ Bâ, *Scarlet Song*, p. 20.

¹²⁹ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 95.

¹³⁰ Harrell-Bond, ‘An Interview with Mariama Bâ’, p. 396.

‘It is Immoral for a Woman to Subjugate Herself. She should be Punished’:¹ Changing Concepts of Motherhood and Marriage in the Fiction of Buchi Emecheta

Of all the women writers in contemporary African literature Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria has been the most sustained and vigorous voice of direct, feminist protest.²

‘The mother of a family has no time to travel. But she has time to die.’³

African Women Writers and the Politics of Feminism

Buchi Emecheta’s work is predominantly feminist. Emecheta questions the fundamental institutions of African tradition in relation to their treatment of women, particularly family, marriage, tribal authority, and motherhood. Moreover, her work shows no sympathy for those women who are not ready to fight for themselves. However, she refuses to associate herself with the feminist label: ‘I have never called myself a feminist. Now if you choose to call me a feminist, that is your business; but I don’t subscribe to the feminist idea that all men are brutal and repressive and we must reject them. Some of these men are my brothers and fathers and sons. Am I to reject them too?’⁴ This shows a cautious refusal of a particularly narrow definition of feminism. Four years later in an article, ‘Feminism with a Small “f”!’ Emecheta says, ‘I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small f.’⁵

However, Emecheta is not the only African women writer who has shown her discomfort with the feminist label. Ama Ata Aidoo is also suspicious of the label and its

¹ Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo, ‘Conversation with Buchi Emecheta’, in *Gender Issues in Nigeria: A Feminine Perspective* (Lagos: Vista Books, 1996), p. 91.

² Lloyd W. Brown, ‘Buchi Emecheta’, in *Women Writers in Black Africa* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 35.

³ Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, trans. Moudpe Bode-Thomas (Oxford: Heinemann, 2008), p. 79.

⁴ Buchi Emecheta, Lecture at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. on 8 Feb. 1994, cited in Gwendolyn Mikell, ‘African Feminism: Toward a New Politics of Representation’, *Feminist Studies*, 21.2 (1995), p. 406.

⁵ Buchi Emecheta, ‘Feminism with a Small “f”!’, in *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers’ Conference, Stockholm 1986*, ed. Kirsten Holst Peterson (Uppsala, Sweden: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988), p. 175.

cultural connotations. 'I shall not protest if you call me a feminist', she said, adding: 'But I am not a feminist because I write about women. Are men writers male chauvinist pigs because they write about men? Or is a writer an African nationalist just by writing about Africans? Or a revolutionary for writing about oppressed humanity? Obviously not [...] no writer, female or male is a feminist just by writing about women.'⁶ Flora Nwapa is another important Nigerian novelist who has distanced herself from the feminist label. In 1993 when Marie Umeh asked Nwapa to comment on Katherine Frank's depiction of her as a radical feminist, she replied, 'I don't think I am a radical feminist. I don't even accept that I am a feminist. I accept that I am an ordinary woman who is writing about what she knows.'⁷

According to Susan Arndt, the ambivalence of many African women towards this western idea of feminism indicates that anti-feminist positions are prevalent in Africa.⁸ Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo explains that the reason for the rejection of feminism is that despite 'its noble goals, feminism is often misunderstood. In some people's minds, feminism conjures up visions of aggressive women who try to be like men, dress carelessly and abandon essential feminine attributes.'⁹ According to Susan Arndt, these 'visions of aggressive women' often equate feminism with the radical feminism, and 'this in turn with hatred of men, penis envy, the non-acceptance of African traditions, the fundamental rejection of marriage and motherhood.'¹⁰

⁶ Ama Ata Aidoo, 'Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves', *AFA: Journal of Creative Writing*, 1 (1982), p. 41.

⁷ Marie Umeh, 'The Poetics of Economic Independence for Female Empowerment: An Interview with Flora Nwapa', *Research in African Literatures*, 26.2 (1995), p. 27.

⁸ See Susan Arndt, 'Feminism Reconsidered: African Perspectives on Feminism', in *The Dynamics of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying Feminist Literatures* (Trenton, NJ; Africa World Press, 2002), p. 27.

⁹ Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo, 'Who is Afraid of Feminism?', in *Gender Issues in Nigeria: A Feminine Perspective* (Lagos: Vista Books, 1996), p. 1.

¹⁰ Arndt, 'Feminism Reconsidered', p. 27.

The Nigerian Chinweizu, an influential African cultural scholar says, that feminism is a movement of ‘bored matriarchists’, ‘frustrated tomboys’ and ‘natural termagants.’¹¹ For Chinweizu ‘feminism is a revolt in paradise; and the feminist rebels jeopardise the ancient matriarchist privileges of all women.’¹² Chinweizu’s *Anatomy of Female Power: A Masculinist Dissection of Matriarchy* (1990) is a sustained and harsh critique of feminist politics.¹³ Other critics of feminism argue that African women who identify with feminism are ‘blind copy-cats of Western European feminists.’¹⁴ Therefore African’s relationship with feminism is that of anxiety and unease.

African women writers’ reluctance to accept the ‘feminist’ label is due to the influence of western hegemony on the ideals of feminism, and the absence of the categories of race and imperial history in western feminist discourses. Susan Arndt declares that ‘African women view gender in the context of political, economic, cultural and social forms and mechanisms of oppression such as racism, neo-colonialism, (cultural) imperialism, capitalism and imperialism, religious fundamentalism, as well as dictatorial and/or corrupt systems. Moreover, issues that have not been traditionally defined as feminist, such as access to clean water and housing, must be included.’¹⁵ Therefore it is difficult for African women to relate to western feminism. In a response to Gerburg Treusch-Dieters’s paper ‘Gender and Gen-Technology’, which was presented in Berlin on

¹¹ Chinweizu, ‘Feminism: A Revolt in Paradise’, in *Anatomy of Female Power: A Masculinist Dissection of Matriarchy* (Lagos: Pero, 1990), p. 118.

¹² Chinweizu, ‘Feminism’, p. 122.

¹³ Chinweizu’s criticism of feminism and his dealing with women’s issues are at times misogynistic. As he says: ‘When a woman tells a man “I love you”, she means “I want you to feed me, house me, clothe me, fuck me, get me great with child, and take me as your burden until I catch a better slave.”’ According to Chinweizu, there are three types of men, *the macho*, *the musho*, and *the masculinist*. The macho and musho have been bred for nest slavery, by which Chinweizu means marriage, and the masculinist is a man who is devoted to male liberty, and who would avoid nest slavery. He concludes his argument with the following lines: ‘The masculinist believes that every woman has every right to do whatever she wants with her body, except enslave a man with it. If she wants to hoard it, and tender her unbroken hymen to the worms in her grave, that is her prerogative. If she wants to give her genitals to any man, or to twenty men, or to a thousand; or to a chicken or goat or gorilla or horse or hippo or elephant or polar bear (in that alleged order of mounting vigour) – that too is her business.’ See Chinweizu, *Anatomy of Female Power*, pp. 42, 124, 126.

¹⁴ Molara Ogundipe Leslie, ‘Introducing WIN: Women in Nigeria’, in *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994), p. 126.

¹⁵ Arndt, ‘Feminism Reconsidered’, p. 34.

May 5, 1997, in a conference titled 'Being a Woman: Writing the Lost Body?', Chikwenye Ogunyemi says that 'the scholar was talking about Cyborgs; she was talking about technology. In the discussion, she raised questions in the medical sphere about transplants and about who has the power to declare a body dead and so on. We have not yet got to that stage at all. When you become involved in this type of conversation, then the African world, which has not yet battled malaria, gets left out totally.'¹⁶ In a similar vein, Emecheta says: 'I do believe in the African kind of feminism. They call it womanism, because, you see, you Europeans don't worry about water, you don't worry about schooling, you are so well off. Now, I buy land, and I say, "Ok, I can't build on it, I have no money, so I give it to some women to start planting." This is my brand of feminism.'¹⁷

Another important factor, due to which African women writers are distancing themselves from this label of feminism apart from having a different social reality, is the misinterpretations of their work by western feminist critics. The white North American literary scholar Katherine Frank uses culturally-specific western feminist perspectives in order to understand African literary texts, and as a result produces interpretive distortions. For example she states that Emecheta argues in her novels, that in order to be independent, African woman must renounce her African identity because of the 'historically established and culturally sanctioned sexism of African society.'¹⁸ However if she wishes to retain her Africanness, then she must resign her claims to 'freedom' and 'self-fulfilment.'¹⁹ This appropriation of African texts by western feminists is problematic. Sexism, Emecheta's novels suggest, must be combated and condemned globally, however the strategies to fight sexism need to be anchored in local needs. The history of colonisation is resonant for African women writers, and white feminist discourse needs seriously to engage with this.

¹⁶ Susan Arndt, 'African Gender Trouble and African Womanism: An Interview with Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Wanjira Muthoni', *Signs*, 25.3 (2000), p. 718.

¹⁷ Buchi Emecheta, 'The Dilemma of Being in Between Two Cultures', in *African Voices: Interviews with Thirteen African Writers*, ed. Raoul Granqvist and John Strotbury (Sydney: Dangaroo, 1989), p. 19.

¹⁸ See Katherine Frank, 'Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa', *African Literature Today*, 15 (1987), p. 15.

¹⁹ Frank, 'Women Without Men', p. 17.

Nkiru Nzegwu argues that white feminists ‘pathologize’ and ‘demonize’ the difference.²⁰ It is important to understand, Nzegwu suggests, the internal dynamics of imperialism in order to realise the variations of its abusive nature:

Imperialism is gendered when the political, economic, and social character of dominance is constructed on racial and gender lines, when white women exploit their racial and institutional privileges to racialize others, to claim advantages, and to assert authority over women of color. Insofar as these women’s legitimizing authority derives from the structure of the larger socio-political framework of imperialism and global economics and establishes a racialized relationship of subordination between women, white women cannot absolve themselves of complicity in imperialism and oppression. Their claim to sisterhood is diversionary.²¹

For Nzegwu this sisterhood in reality is a ‘sisterarchy.’²² In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnaife works as a washerman at Dr Meers’s house. Nnaife is the husband of the protagonist, Nnu Ego. Dr Meers’s wife whom Nnaife calls madam, and at one point ‘master’,²³ is also connected with exploitative imperialism, although she is not as powerful as her husband. Nnaife takes pride in washing and hanging ‘white woman’s smalls’ (p.47), which humiliates his wife Nnu Ego. Mrs Meers is indifferent towards Nigerians and laughs ‘in a low, patronising way, displaying the attitude which white people adopted towards their servants in the colonies’ (p.83). Nnaife does not question this denigrating attitude towards him, as the narrator informs that ‘[h]e was one of the Africans who were so used to being told that they were stupid in those days that they started to believe in their own imperfection’ (p. 83). When Dr and Mrs Meers leave for England permanently, she wants

²⁰ Nkiru Nzegwu, ‘O Africa: Gender Imperialism in Academia’, in *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, ed. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), p. 99.

²¹ Nzegwu, ‘O Africa’, p. 103.

²² Nzegwu, ‘O Africa’, p. 102.

²³ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (Oxford: Educational Publishers, 1994), p. 84. Due to number of citations all further references to this work will be by page number in the text.

her servants to remember them with affection, '[y]et the social distance must be maintained, behind the decorum of a meaningless smile' (p.84). There is no interaction in the novel between Mrs Meers and any Nigerian woman, including Nnu Ego. Emecheta does not give her a name; she is Mrs Meers, the wife of an English doctor in Nigeria, and an accomplice in the oppression of Nigerian people. The concept of 'sisterhood' and 'common oppression' is also problematic for bell hooks. According to hooks, '[w]hite women liberationists saw feminism as "their" movement and resisted any efforts by non-white women to critique challenge or change its direction. [...] In their eagerness to promote the idea of sisterhood, they ignore the complexity of women's experience.'²⁴ Thus the relationship between Nnu Ego and Mrs Meers problematizes the concept of universal sisterhood as it is claimed in white feminist discourses.

Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí contends that white feminists' reluctance to investigate race derives from their fear of investigating their own privileges: 'It allows them to ignore the fact that the only reason they are institutionally privileged and superior to women of color is that they have been defined as such by the white patriarchal system. What white women do not realise is that if they are motivated by women's subordination in their own society to study other women, it is their economic and racial dominance in the global system that made it possible.'²⁵ Oyěwùmí pinpoints how few white feminists make substantial references to the history of imperialism in their discourses of female emancipation and sisterhood.²⁶ In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego's financial troubles are doubled when she cannot support her husband financially: 'She might not have any money to supplement her husband's income, but were they not in a white man's world where it was the duty of

²⁴ bell hooks, 'Black Women and Feminism', in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1982), pp. 190, 195; see also bell hooks, 'Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women', in *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge* ed. Sneja Gunew (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 27-41; and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', in *Feminist Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), pp. 49-74.

²⁵ Oyěwùmí, 'The White Woman's Burden: African Women in Western Feminist Discourse', in *African Women and Feminism*, p. 29.

²⁶ Oyěwùmí, 'The White Woman's Burden', p. 31.

the father to provide for his family? In Ibadan, women made a contribution, but in urban Lagos, men had to be the sole provider; this new setting robbed the woman of her useful role' (p.81). This reflects that imperialism further reinforced women's subservient status. I must state here that I am not implying that African women enjoyed complete freedom and sovereignty in pre-colonial times. Rather, the point here is that the era of colonialism complicated the socio-political position of African women. Therefore, it is important to consider the ways in which imperialism may have affected the development of creative literature produced by African women, their negotiations with their traditions, and their reluctance to relate to western feminism.

Gayatri Spivak argues that Eurocentrism presents '[t]hird Worlds as distant cultures, exploited but with rich intact literary heritages waiting to be recovered, interpreted, and curricularized.'²⁷ This information retrieval approach is making the dialogue between Africa and the west difficult, especially along gender lines. According to Trinh Minh Ha, the consequence of this western hegemony is that 'it creates a conversation of "us" with "us" about "them" [...] a conversation in which them (Africans) is silenced.'²⁸ Saddeka Arebi argues that 'in a discourse of other cultures, questions of who speaks, what is and what is not discussed, how it is discussed, what questions may be asked, who defines the reality, and what is true or false take on new significance.'²⁹ These questions are taking centre stage in African women writers' investigations of identity politics, which are attentive to imperialism and its various manifestations.³⁰

²⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry*, 12.1 (1985), p. 243.

²⁸ Trinh Minh Ha, 'The Language of Nativism: Anthropology as a Scientific Conversation of Man with Man', in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 67.

²⁹ Saddeka Arebi, 'Field Statement on the Anthropological Study of Gender', Department of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley, 1986. Unpublished, cited in Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí, ed. *African Women and Feminism*, p. 41.

³⁰ See Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987); Valerie Amos, Pratibha Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', *Feminist Review*, 17 (1984), pp. 3-9; Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, ed. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indian UP, 1991); Delia Aguilar, 'Third World Revolution and First

Spivak suggests that '[f]irst World feminist must learn to stop feeling privileged as a woman.'³¹ Feminist academic scholarship of African literature must engage with socio-cultural realities of African texts, otherwise they will continue to produce skewed visions. According to Spivak in order to understand third world women the focus should be shifted from the first world women to the third world women: 'not merely who am I? But who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?'³²

It is against this background that Buchi Emecheta and other African women writers are reluctant to associate themselves with western feminist agendas.

African Alternatives to Feminism: Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, and Negofeminism

Alice Walker introduces the concept of womanism in 1983. A womanist is 'committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.'³³ A womanist 'loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually.'³⁴ According to Walker, a womanist is not only concerned with overcoming sexist discrimination, but also discriminations based on class and race.

The Nigerian literary critic Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi also coined the term womanism, however her concept is different from Walker's. According to her '[t]he ultimate difference between the feminist and the womanist is [...] what each sees of patriarchy and what each thinks can be changed.'³⁵ Ogunyemi posits that 'a womanist [...] will recognize that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate

World Feminism: Toward a Dialogue', in *Promissory Notes: Women in the Transition to Socialism*, ed. Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp, and Marilyn B. Young (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), pp. 338-344; and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, 'Discrimination Against Afro-American Women in the Woman's Movement, 1830-1920', in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, ed. Filomena Chioma Steady (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publication Co., 1981), pp. 301-315.

³¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'French Feminism in an International Frame', *Yale French Studies*, 62 (1981), p. 157.

³² Spivak, 'French Feminism in an International Frame', p. 179.

³³ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (London: The Women's Press, 1984), p. xi.

³⁴ Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, p. xi.

³⁵ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, 'Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English', *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society*, 11 (1985), p. 64.

racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy.³⁶

Ogunyemi contends that African womanism is different to its African-American counterpart: 'It is necessary to reiterate that the womanist praxis in Africa has never totally identified with all the original Walkerian precepts. An important point of departure is the African obsession to have children as well as the silence on or intolerance of lesbianism.'³⁷ Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), suggest that lesbianism may be explored in future, but for the time being, both writers are reluctant to deal with this issue. The triggering settings are in place in both novels. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus is in love with Miss Iqbal, but it does not go beyond that point: 'I held her eyes in mind, took her hand in mine. The feeling of our hands touching was strange, sudden. It was a feeling that made my body tremble with a deep distant pleasure.'³⁸ Saadawi could have developed this 'deep distant pleasure,' but this emotional awakening does not lead to a coherent understanding of this emotion and eventually ends at confusion and disappointment: 'But I continued to turn round and look back at it for quite a while as if it was about to swing open again, or as though I had a feeling of certainty that someone was standing behind it and getting ready to push it open at any moment. I walked with heavy steps behind my uncle, carrying the image of that closed door engraved in my mind.'³⁹ Aidoo also portrays lesbian love in *Our Sister Killjoy*. Sissie and her German friend Marija are aware of this emotion, and both feel it intensely:

It was the left hand that woke her up to the reality of Marija's embrace. The warmth of her tears on her neck. The hotness of her lips against hers. As one does from a bad dream, impulsively, Sissie shook herself free, unnecessarily, so that she unintentionally hit Marija on the right cheek with the back of her hand. [...] Marija

³⁶ Ogunyemi, 'Womanism', p. 64.

³⁷ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, 'Flora Nwapa: Genesis and Matrix', in *Africa Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 133.

³⁸ Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1983), p. 30.

³⁹ Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, pp. 35-36.

was crying silently. There was a tear streaming out of one of her eyes. The tear was coming out of the left eye only. The right eye was completely dry. Sissie felt pain at the sight of that one tear.⁴⁰

Sissie's 'unnecessarily' violent reaction in response to Marija's affectionate gesture and her reluctance to embrace 'Marija's embrace' discloses her rooted, cultural denial of lesbianism. However, her feeling of anguish at the sight of Marija's 'one tear' indicates her ability to empathise with Marija's sexuality which is still considered alien in African countries. However, Aidoo does not allow them to develop this emotion and leaves it at this point. The absence of homosexuality in Emecheta's work also indicates that it is still a taboo subject and African women writers are not yet ready to engage with homoeroticism.

Walkerian womanism emphasises that gender relations must be discussed in the context of race and class. However, this gender-race-class approach is not sufficient for African situations.⁴¹ Susan Arndt argues that religious fundamentalism, gerontocracy, autocracy and corruption are also affecting gender relations in Africa.⁴² Likewise, Chikwenye Ogunyemi argues:

As for us, we cannot take the African-American situation and its own peculiarities and impose it on Africa, particularly as Africa is so big and culturally diverse.

When I was thinking about *womanism*, I was thinking about those areas which are relevant to Africans, but which Blacks in America cannot deal with – issues like extreme poverty and in-laws problems, such as older women oppressing younger women, women oppressing their co-wives or men oppressing their wives. Religious

⁴⁰ Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy* (Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1977), pp. 64-65.

⁴¹ See Obioma Nnaemeka, 'Introduction: Imag(in)ing Knowledge, Power, and Subversion in the Margins', in *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. Obioma Nnaemeka (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1-25.

⁴² Susan Arndt, 'Boundless Whiteness? Feminism and White Women in the Mirror of African Feminist Writing', *Journal for African Culture and Society*, 29-30 (2005), p. 160.

fundamentalism is another such African problem that is not really relevant to African-Americans.⁴³

Ogunyemi's comment intimates the complexity of feminist politics in multifarious African contexts. The religious fundamentalism of Boko Haram is, in the main, a Nigerian problem. Similarly the presence of racism, a product of colonial Rhodesia and Mugabe's postcolonial government, is a unique Zimbabwean condition. The ongoing civil war in the Christian south of Sudan is different from other civil wars in Africa, for example, Nigerian civil war of 1967. Therefore, due to this heterogeneity of experience for African women living in different African countries, an absolute unity of all black women under one feminist banner is undesirable and inappropriate. Apart from womanism there are some other alternatives to western feminism in Africa. In 1994, the Nigerian scholar Molar Ogundipe-Leslie came up with the idea of stiwanism:

'STIWA' is my acronym for *Social Transformation Including Women in Africa*. [...] This new term "STIWA" allows me to discuss the needs of African women today in the tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social being of women. [...] 'STIWA' is about the inclusion of African women in the contemporary social and political transformation of Africa. Be a 'Stiwanist.' I am sure there will be few African men who will oppose the concept of including women in the social transformation of Africa, which is really the issue. Women have to participate as co-partners in social transformation.⁴⁴

According to Nigerian writer Catherine Acholonu, 'Africa's alternative to western feminism is MOTHERISM and motherism denotes *motherhood, nature and nurture*.'⁴⁵ She

⁴³ Susan Arndt, 'Of Womanism and Bearded Women: An Interview with Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Wanjira Muthoni', *ANA Review*, 2.6 (1998), p. 4.

⁴⁴ Molar Ogundipe-Leslie, 'Stiwanism: Feminism in an African Context', in *Re-Creating Ourselves*, pp. 229-230.

⁴⁵ Catherine Obianuju Acholonu, 'Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative', in *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (Owerri: Afa Publications, 1995), p. 110.

argues that ‘cooperation with nature is paramount to Motherism and the task of the Motherist is that of healing and protecting the natural cohesive essence of the family, the child, the society and the environment.’⁴⁶ Acholonu proposes that ‘motherism’ is not restricted to women only, but men can also be motherist. However, what is important is that they ‘are concerned about the menace of wars around the globe, racism, malnutrition, political and economic exploitation, hunger and starvation, child abuse and morality, drug addiction, proliferation of broken homes and homelessness around the world, the degradation of environment and depletion of ozone layer through pollution.’⁴⁷

African women writers’ dissatisfaction with the label feminism and their alternatives to western feminism gives a lot of emphasis to traditional family structures. However, this emphasis must not be considered as regressive by using western feminism as a standard for analysing African texts. Imperialist arrogance must not be allowed to distort African literature. Chinua Achebe also disapproves this condescending attitude: ‘We are not opposed to criticism but we are getting a little weary of all the special types of criticism which have been designed for us by people whose knowledge of us is very limited.’⁴⁸ Western feminist critics should not trivialise African women’s negotiations with their traditions but rather, in the words of Achebe, should develop the habit of listening:

Look at Africa as a continent of people. [...] And listen to them. We have done a lot of listening ourselves. This is a situation where you have a strong person and a weak person. The weak person does all the listening, and up to a point the strong person even forgets that the weak person may have something to say. Because he is there, a kind of fixture, you simply talk at him. A British governor of Southern Rhodesia once said the partnership between the whites and the blacks is the partnership of the horse and its rider. He wasn’t trying to be funny, he seriously

⁴⁶ Acholonu, ‘Motherism’, p. 111.

⁴⁷ Acholonu, ‘Motherism’, p. 111.

⁴⁸ Chinua Achebe, ‘Where Angels Fear to Tread’, *Nigeria Magazine*, 75 (1962), p. 61.

thought so. Now, that's what we want the West to get rid of – thinking of Africa as the horse rather than as the man. [...] Seeing the world from the position of the weak person is a great education. [...] So it is important that we develop the ability to listen to the weak. Not only in Africa, but even in your own society, the strong must listen to the weak.⁴⁹

The strong can only listen to the weak when they stop feeling privileged. Obioma Nnaemeka argues that “all-knowing”, “all-talking”, and “never listening” feminist critics of African literature must try to understand that the negotiations of African feminists with their traditions is neither narrow-minded nor timorous.⁵⁰ Nnaemeka contends that by bending the rules to their needs, they are attesting the elasticity of their cultural boundaries. Nnaemeka defines this as feminism of negotiations – negofeminism,⁵¹ which highlights that ‘[t]he argument for ambiguities, complexity, paradoxes, give and take, compromise, [and] negotiation’⁵² is constant in African women’s work.

The various alternatives to western feminism manifest African women writers’ fervent enthusiasm and commitment to gender issues within their particular socio-cultural loci. Western feminism, womanism, stiwanism, motherism, and negofeminism are all committed to restoring women’s dignity and equality in their respective societies. What is therefore needed is an international dialogue, and an open exchange of perspectives, which recognises both commonalities and differences. Emecheta’s negotiations of the institutions of marriage and motherhood can be viewed as an important part of that international dialogue rather than as reductive readings of Nigerian culture.

⁴⁹ Bill Moyers, ‘Chinua Achebe’, in *A World of Ideas: Conversations with Thoughtful Men and Women About American Life Today and the Ideas of Shaping Our Future*, ed. Bill Moyers and Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Doubleday, 1989), pp. 343-44.

⁵⁰ Obioma Nnaemeka, ‘Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries: Rereading Flora Nwapa and Her Compatriots’, *Research in African Literatures*, 26.2 (1995), pp. 84, 92.

⁵¹ Nnaemeka, ‘Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries’, p. 107.

⁵² Nnaemeka, ‘Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries’, p. 109.

Representation of Female Characters in the Work of Male African Writers

The scarcity of African female writers and critics has encouraged the appropriation of female experiences and misrepresentation of female characters in the work of male writers. Gloria Chukukere argues that ‘the majority of male writers often present their cultural reality as the cultural reality.’⁵³ In Ngũgĩ’s novel, the woman is specified either as a mother – Mumbai in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) or a harlot – Wanja in *Petals of Blood* (1977). Other male writers like Léopold Sédar Senghor define womanhood in terms of motherhood. According to Senghor, ‘woman occupies the first place’ in Africa. ‘Contrary to what is often thought today,’ Senghor adds, ‘the African woman does not need to be liberated. She has been free for many thousands of years.’⁵⁴ Senghor’s poem ‘Black Woman,’ for example is an epitome of African womanhood, and in this process of celebration, it transforms the woman into a symbol of Mother Africa.⁵⁵

There is a Yoruba proverb ‘Mother is Gold’, and according to Andrea Benton Rushing, ‘portraits of black women in African poetry seem to radiate from that hub.’⁵⁶ In *Whispers of the Continent*, Wilfred Cartey describes that in the works of many twentieth-century African male writers such as Camara Laye, the love for Africa is expressed in terms of the love for mother, who is unpolluted and uncontaminated by European colonisation and is the essence of traditional African culture.⁵⁷ In the introduction to his book, *Woman Writers in Black Africa*, Lloyd Brown indicates that most African male writers’ presentation of women characters ‘have ultimately been shaped by a certain

⁵³ Gloria Chukukere, ‘The Role of African Women in Life and Literature’, in *Gender Voices and Choices: Redefining Women in Contemporary African Fiction* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd., 1995), p. 6; see also Chandrani Sinha, ‘Women in Protest Literature: A Study of Four Novels of Buchi Emecheta’, *Africa Quarterly*, 34 (1994), pp. 221-234. (p. 224.)

⁵⁴ Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, ed. and trans. John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 45.

⁵⁵ See Léopold Sédar Senghor, ‘Black Woman’, in *Negritude: Black Poetry from Africa and the Caribbean*, ed. and trans. Norman Shapiro (New York: October House, 1970), p. 131.

⁵⁶ Andrea B. Rushing, ‘Images of Black Women in Modern African Poetry: An Overview’, in *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*, ed. Roseann Bell, Bettye Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979), p. 19.

⁵⁷ See Wilfred Cartey, *Whispers of the Continent* (New York: Vintage, 1969).

limited and limiting idealism that assumes that marriage and motherhood per se are unequalled routes to female fulfilment and redemption.’⁵⁸

Chinua Achebe plays on the Igbo saying ‘Nneka’ or ‘Mother is supreme’⁵⁹ in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), but most of the women in his novels are socially and economically disadvantaged, reduced to the level of mere objects and props. Beatrice Okoh in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) is mainly portrayed as Chris’s ‘girl’, despite having a strong educational background and a prestigious position as a Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance. She is largely limited to the role of a girlfriend. Beatrice indicts patriarchy and false male pride, but does not condemn with equal vigour the diminished opportunities and restricted choices available to women. According to Patricia Alden, when Ikem finishes his long speech about his new insight into women’s issues, there is time for Beatrice to voice her opinion, but she is silenced by the passionate kiss which leaves her ‘trembling violently [...] struggling for air’;⁶⁰ ‘The storm is over, the goddess Idemili has manifested herself and given Ikem his insight, and then moved on.’⁶¹ The symbolic meaning of goddess stifles Beatrice, and has not given her any control over her life.

Emecheta’s Second Class Citizen in the Ditch

In the works of Emecheta there is a clear attempt to complicate, problematize and even break with the tradition of canonical African male writing. According to Maryse Conde, ‘the personality and the inner reality of African women have been hidden under such a heap of myths, so called ethnological theories, rapid generalizations and patent untruths that it might be interesting to study what they have to say for themselves when they decide

⁵⁸ Brown, ‘Buchi Emecheta’, p. 7.

⁵⁹ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Oxford: Educational Books Ltd., 1958), p. 94.

⁶⁰ Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1988), p. 92.

⁶¹ Patricia Alden, ‘New Women Old Myths’, in *Emerging Perspectives on Nuruddin Farrah*, ed. Derek Wright (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 2003), p. 365.

to speak.⁶² Emecheta's novels reflect the predicament of the Nigerian woman trapped in biased and prejudiced traditions that only help to maintain and strengthen the male power and authority in her society. For Emecheta, women are at the bottom of food chain; the most overlooked of all the underprivileged groups. Her novels portray women and girls who have been broken, degraded, and abused by men. All of Emecheta's protagonists - Adah in *In The Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen*, Akunna in *The Bride Price*, Ojebetta in *The Slave Girl*, Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Gwendolen in *The Family* and Kehinde in *Kehinde* - are women and in this male-dominated society, to be born a girl is a sin. As Emecheta remarks:

In Nigeria where I grew up, only one's enemy would make a special prayer for the birth of a girl child. The normal prayers would go, 'You will be safely delivered of a bouncing baby boy, a real man-child, on a large banana leaf, so that we can come and make jolly with plenty of palm wine and pounded yam.' The pregnant woman would not protest to this prayer because in her heart she too would like to have a man child who would not be married away but would stay in the family's homestead and look after his mother when she became old and weak. In most African societies, the birth of a son enhances a woman's authority in the family: male children are very, very important.⁶³

This depicts a society which put a huge emphasis on child-bearing and child-rearing, especially male children. Therefore, the woman who is infertile and fails to produce male child, will be severely ostracised by the society. Emecheta in her work emphasises the mother-daughter relationship as a particular target of this patriarchal prejudice, which forces mothers to give their sons preferences over their daughters. Patricia Lee Young views the undermining of a mother-daughter relationship as an index of an ideology that:

⁶² Maryse Conde, 'Three Female Writers in Modern Africa: Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo and Grace Ogot', *Presence Africaine*, 82 (1972), p. 132.

⁶³ Buchi Emecheta, 'Introduction', in *Our Own Freedom* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1981), p. 1.

values the separate, the fixed, and the permanent as opposed to flow, change, and continuance, the global modality to which the maternal body, inclusive of male and female substance, commits ‘from time immemorial.’ The paradigms driving the economies and the epistemologies of patriarchal cultures construct unity in one fixed way, by ensuring that only masculine paradigms govern, and thus continue to advocate constructs of separatism and friction.⁶⁴

According to Young, in Igbo culture, a woman does not achieve womanhood unless she produces a male heir. Therefore a mother looks at her daughter partly as a sign of her own incompleteness.⁶⁵ Young argues that Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Aku-nna in *The Bride Price* (1976), and Gwendolen in *The Family* (1990) are victims of fractured mother-daughter relationship.

Nnu Ego, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, finds herself relieved when she realises that the new stillborn child is a girl:

Nnu Ego stared at the picture she made with her dead daughter in horror. She felt like crying, but at the same time did not want to. She felt the loss of this little piece of humanity, this unfortunate little thing she had carried while climbing up to Zabo market, this thing she knew was probably being hurt as she had bent defiantly down to wash clothes for her sons. [...] Then she started to feel guilty. Had she wanted the child to die — was that the interpretation of the slight relief she had experienced when she crawled to the dead child to check what sex it was? That it was a girl had lessened her sense of loss. Oh, God, she did not wish it. She would have been happy to have the child. (pp. 194-195)

⁶⁴ Patricia Lee Young, “‘My Mother is here’: Buchi Emecheta’s Love Child”, in *Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in 20th-Century Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), p. 77.

⁶⁵ Young, “‘My Mother is here’”, p. 79.

However, it is only towards the end of the novel that Nnu Ego realises that the male-dominated communal organisation has forced her to think, feel and act in certain prescribed ways. Aku-nna is another victim of this distorted mother-daughter relationship. She realises that by Ezekiel Odi's death she 'had not only lost a father, she had also lost a mother. Ma Blackie found herself so immersed in the Okonkwo family politics, and in making ends meet, that she seldom had time to ask how the world was with her daughter.'⁶⁶ This estranged relationship between Ma Blackie and Aku-nna is further complicated by Ma Blackie's pregnancy. Aku-nna discovers that Ma Blackie is pregnant by Okonkwo, and she would let 'Okonkwo have his way [choosing the husband for Aku-nna] now that he had made her dreams of becoming a mother once more come true.[...] The bitterness Aku-nna was feeling had gone beyond tears. She had heard it said often enough that one's mother was one's best friend, but she was beginning to doubt it.'⁶⁷ Aku-nna's fears become reality when Ma Blackie withdraws her support of Aku-nna's strong feelings for Chike Ofulue. Chike Ofulue belongs to a line of slaves, and in spite of his father's wealth, could only bring dishonour upon Okonkwo's family, and derail potential opportunities for both economic enrichment and desired titles.

On the night of Aku-nna's initiation into womanhood, Chike and Okoboshi (the man Okonkwo has chosen for Aku-nna as a husband) display open hostility. Suddenly, Okoboshi attacks Aku-nna and seizes her roughly by her shoulder, and grabs at both her breasts and starts to squeeze and hurt her. Chike retaliates and hit Okoboshi. When Ma Blackie hears Aku-nna's screams, she hurries into the hut and mediates. But rather than showing affection, concern and love for her daughter, she turns on her and takes side with Okoboshi: "“You mean you have nice breasts and don't want men to touch? Girls like you tend to end up having babies in their father's houses, because they cannot endure open play, so they go to secret places and have themselves disvirgined. Is that the type of person

⁶⁶ Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1989), p. 101.

⁶⁷ Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, pp. 150-151.

you are turning out to be? I will kill you if you bring shame and dishonour on us. How can he hurt you with all these others watching?’”⁶⁸ This quotation shows Ma Blackie’s failure to empathise with her daughter. For Young, these two selves (mother-daughter) are ‘primed and ironically unify to attack the daughter (or the daughter surrogate): the one angrily to protect its own objectification; and the other to cannibalize itself. The detachment within and without kills the woman (sometimes literally) and allows patriarchy to continue its killing.’⁶⁹

In *The Family*, Gwendolen Brillianton suffers from a fractured relationship with her mother. Gwendolen’s mother Sonia leaves for England to be with her husband Winston, and places her in the care of her Granny, Naomi. Sonia promises to send for Gwendolen, but two years pass, and during that time, Gwendolen has received only four letters from Sonia, an indication of her lack of concern for her daughter. But once reunited with her mother, Gwendolen very quickly realises that Sonia now has had two sons and needs her as a babysitter and housekeeper. Sonia reprimands Gwendolen when she requests some study time at home so that she might move out of the remedial classes: “‘You stay all day at dat school doing nutting, and when you come home, you have to help. You understand me? Dat’s why me send fe you to come, not just for education!’”⁷⁰ There is no doubt that Sonia is having financial problems but what is disturbing in these lines is that she has no sympathy for her daughter. On the day her mother left for England, she observed: ‘Gwendolen had never seen [Sonia] so happy [...] it looked as if her Mammy was happy to leave her behind, giving the impression that she was not really wanted.’⁷¹ This distorted mother-daughter relationship, in which the daughter has the constant feeling that she is unwanted, is also present in Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* (1983). Firdaus, the main protagonist has never felt any feeling of warmth, love, and care from her mother:

⁶⁸ Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, pp. 148-149.

⁶⁹ Young, “‘My Mother is here’”, p. 75.

⁷⁰ Buchi Emecheta, *The Family* (New York: George Braziller, 1990), p. 84.

⁷¹ Emecheta, *The Family*, p. 18.

‘Sometimes when there was no food at home we would all go to bed with empty stomachs. But he would never fail to have a meal. My mother would hide his food from us at the bottom of one of the holes in the oven.’⁷² In the winter, the mother ‘used to abandon me alone and go to my father to keep him warm.’⁷³ Patriarchy has a part to play in this distorted mother-daughter relationship, but the mother and the female community are also responsible for cooperating fully with masculine values. Firdaus’s mother, who initiates her daughter’s circumcision, Ma Blackie’s lack of concern for her daughter Aku-nna, and Sonia’s absolute indifference towards her daughter’s desire to study indicate their complicity in social and sexual discrimination against their daughters.

Marriage in Emecheta’s Fiction

Emecheta is not only interested in representing women as victims of an oppressive male dominated society. Rather her work also demonstrates that women should be able to fight for their dignity and independence, and should not suffer in resigned silence. Cynthia Ward contends that Emecheta’s novels represent the experience of the African woman struggling to assert herself against ‘nearly every form of oppression – racial, sexual, colonial – that human society has created’, a self that must find its voice in order to speak not only for itself, but also for all oppressed people.⁷⁴ The narrative of *The Slave Girl* focuses on Ojebeta, an Igbo girl who is sold to prosperous relatives as a slave by her older brother, Okolie. The money which Okolie secures from the sale of his sister to his relative, Ma Palagada, supports his coming of age ceremony. As Lloyd Brown proposes, *The Slave Girl* ‘amalgamates the idea of Ojebeta’s physical slavery with the more pervasive issue of female persecution and ill-treatment. Emecheta refers to the age-old system of slavery in Africa, the history of European slavery in that continent, and slavery as an allegory of the woman’s traditional status in the society, irrespective of whether she is technically “slave”

⁷² Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, pp. 17-18.

⁷³ Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, p. 16.

⁷⁴ See Cynthia Ward, ‘What They Told Buchi Emecheta: Oral Subjectivity and the Joys of “Otherhood”’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, (1990), p. 83; and Marie Umeh, ‘African Women in Transition in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta’, *Presence Africaine*, 116 (1980), p. 201.

or “free.””⁷⁵ Okolie, her brother, sells her off for the trivial sum of eight pounds. After ‘winning’ her freedom from the Palagadas, she returns to Ibuza to confront another egotistical male relative. Eze, (husband to her aunt Uteh) , insists, for completely mercenary motives, that Ojebeta must marry his cousin, Adim, and threatens that if she refuses “[w]ell we all know what a man can do to a girl to make her wife for ever.””⁷⁶ Eze’s reference to the practice of cutting off a curl of a woman’s hair to ensure her never-ending subjugation and suffering forces Ojebeta to shave ‘off every last vestige of hair on her head.’⁷⁷ This is the beginning of her rebellion against this tradition of oppression. At the end of the novel, she accepts the marriage proposal of Jacob Okonjii, a village man, who lives in Lagos for a number of years and works as an apprentice moulder in the new railway foundry. Since her family does not accept this proposal Ojebeta elopes with him to Lagos. According to Gloria Chukukere, the act of elopement with a man of her choice is a substantial move towards self-realisation, however this whole rebellion is weakened by Ojebeta’s slave mentality:⁷⁸ ‘[She] was content and did not want more of life: she was happy in her husband, happy to be submissive, even to accept an occasional beating, because that was what she had been brought up to believe a wife should expect.’⁷⁹ This comment demonstrates that apart from discriminatory practices in the society, women are also accomplices to their miserable state.

Aunt Uteh, another important female character in *The Slave Girl*, was a beautiful woman in her youth: ‘Uteh [...] had the jet-black skin of the family, and a small intelligent head with a very high forehead. [...] She was always standing straight and looking over people’s heads for she was tall, so narrow and her body so polished that she had the nick

⁷⁵ Brown, ‘Buchi Emecheta’, p. 56.

⁷⁶ Buchi Emecheta, *The Slave Girl* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1979), p. 176.

⁷⁷ Emecheta, *The Slave Girl*, p. 177.

⁷⁸ See Gloria Chineze Chukukere, *Gender Choices and Voices: Redefining Women in Contemporary African Fiction* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1995), p. 184.

⁷⁹ Emecheta, *The Slave Girl*, p. 184.

name of “the black snake that glides.”⁸⁰ She has been compelled by her family to marry Eze, a man ‘with brown skin and eyes that watered all the time like those of wet chick. His body was of the kind that after each bath looked as if he poured ashes over it. He was never healthy, neither in looks nor in reasoning.’⁸¹ Aunt Uteh herself has been the victim of a forced marriage, but rather than reacting against this unjust and pernicious system and helping Ojebeta in her hour of need, she simply informs her that “[n]o woman is ever free. To be owned by a man is a great honour,”⁸² and Emecheta concludes the novel with a harsh statement: ‘Ojebeta, now a woman of thirty-five, was changing masters.’⁸³ Emecheta shows little sympathy for Aunt Uteh and Ojebeta. Instead, through them she reveals the extent to which women are their own enemies. Ojebeta does not grasp the fraud in the myth of ‘good woman’, and ‘good wife’, and as a result, she stays content in her suffering and degradation.

Aku-nna, the main character in *The Bride Price*, rebels against those entrenched practices and codes which hamper female self-actualisation. Since Aku-nna has committed a taboo act in marrying Chike, she becomes the victim of an ancient curse, which says that any woman who marries against the wishes of her parents, and whose bride price is not paid, will die in childbirth. Aku-nna’s uncle refuses to accept the bride price and she dies while giving birth to her daughter, whom Chike names joy. Aku-nna’s death validates the superstitions and insular atavisms against which she retaliates. Brown argues that ‘the traditions against which she rebels are too strongly entrenched in her society and their attendant sanctions are still too dominant in her own mind, and she cannot be completely emancipated from and immune to them. Her death is itself a demonstration of the degree to which her will is still dominated despite her conscious act of revolt.’⁸⁴ There is no doubt

⁸⁰ Emecheta, *The Slave Girl*, p. 38.

⁸¹ Emecheta, *The Slave Girl*, p. 38.

⁸² Emecheta, *The Slave Girl*, p. 166.

⁸³ Emecheta, *The Slave Girl*, p. 190.

⁸⁴ Brown, ‘Buchi Emecheta’, p. 52.

that Aku-nna's death appears to affirm the validity of discriminatory practices against women; however the text also emphasises the need for change in the Nigerian society. Chimalum Nwankwo argues that tradition 'breaks the pair but not before they demonstrate that deep and unconditional affection between man and woman is possible'.⁸⁵ "I told you so. I told you that I would not keep our love a secret. Now, with our little girl, everybody will know. They will all know how passionately we love each other. Our love will never die."⁸⁶ Emecheta, like Bâ, stresses that both men and women must partake in the struggle to change oppressive customs in Nigerian culture. Kirsten Holst Peterson sees *The Bride Price* as a 'warning against rebellion.'⁸⁷ I disagree; *The Bride Price* conveys hope and possibility of change. Emecheta ends the novel by saying that 'Chike and Aku-nna substantiated the traditional superstition they had unknowingly set out to eradicate. [...] It was a psychological hold over every young girl that would continue to exist,'⁸⁸ but her story also suggests that in spite of rigid chauvinistic social structures, revolt is possible and the possibility of a successful rebellion is present in Emecheta's next novel *Double Yoke* (1983).

The powerful grip of chauvinistic practices over individuals is also evident in *Double Yoke*. Ete Kemba, a central character in the novel, is described as a socially conservative Nigerian man. When Ete Kemba meets Nko he sees her as a good future wife for himself: 'Yes, that was the type he would like. A very quiet and submissive woman, a good cook, a good listener, a good worker, a good mother with a good education to match. But her education must be a little less than his own, otherwise they would start talking on the same level.'⁸⁹ Despite being educated, Ete's outlook on life is parochial. For him, his mother is 'the epitome of womanhood. [...] The type who would always obey her man, no

⁸⁵ Chimalum Nwankwo, 'Emecheta's Social Vision: Fantasy or Reality', *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 17.1 (1988), p. 38.

⁸⁶ Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, p. 207.

⁸⁷ Kirsten Holst Peterson, 'Unpopular Opinions: Some African Women Writers', in *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Postcolonial Women's Writing*, ed. Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford (Mundelstrup & Oxford: Dangaroo Press, 1986), p. 116.

⁸⁸ Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, pp. 207-208.

⁸⁹ Buchi Emecheta, *Double Yoke* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1984), p. 32.

matter what [...] the type that never questioned.’⁹⁰ Nko has also internalised the chauvinistic socio-cultural practices of Nigerian society. In the beginning of the novel Nko tells her mother, ‘I want to be an academician and I want to be a quiet nice and obedient wife.’⁹¹ Nko allows Ete Kemba to make love to her on the night he is celebrating his acceptance at the University of Calabar. However, this mutual sexual act brings innumerable sufferings for Nko. Ete Kemba’s love for her turns into a neurosis, since he is not sure whether she is a virgin or not. He loses sleep and concentration on his studies as a result of this virginity syndrome. He tells Nko, “[y]ou are not a virgin are you? [...] There was not a drop of blood. You are a prostitute, a whore and you keep putting on this air of innocence as if you were something else?”⁹² Nko, on the other hand, gets confused and become miserable as a result of Ete’s reckless behaviour: “‘Oh my God, I was a fool. [...] I had thought that, that was my way of showing you that I cared, that I was happy for your success. I ran the risk, knowing it could lead to pregnancy, but I wanted to make it a full and happy day for you. [...] You called me a prostitute because of that, but you forgot that it takes two people at least to make any woman a prostitute. [...] So if I am one, then what are you?’”⁹³

This sexual act, which was Nko’s way of showing her love for Ete Kemba, results in a crisis which haunts her throughout the novel. Ete Kemba treats her viciously once he becomes convinced that she was not a virgin before having sex with him. After they have sex he returns to the place to look for the virginal blood: ‘his lighted torch poured into every hole and every corner, he even searched the blades of every leaf, looking this way and that, his heart pounding [...] he was desperate for that blood she ought to have shed.’⁹⁴ His lunacy does not end here. During the sex, he ‘brutally and desperately penetrated

⁹⁰ Emecheta, *Double Yoke*, p. 42.

⁹¹ Emecheta, *Double Yoke*, p. 96.

⁹² Emecheta, *Double Yoke*, pp. 61-62.

⁹³ Emecheta, *Double Yoke*, p. 63.

⁹⁴ Emecheta, *Double Yoke*, p. 59.

deeper and deeper inside her, so deep that she could feel him thrusting at the mouth of her womb. He was desperate, he was searching for the virginal blood his mother and friends had talked to him so much about.⁹⁵ This shows not only his emotional insecurities but also a strong hold of traditional norms that fetishise female virginity. Nko's body and sexuality is policed by misogynistic conventions which perceive the female body as a commodity which needs to remain 'pure' until marriage. After marriage it will be used to produce the children for the man to whom that body belongs, before finally achieving the status of all-loving and all-sacrificing 'motherhood.' Emecheta castigates these archaic norms about motherhood and virginity and concludes the novel with Nko becoming pregnant by her professor. However, Ete Kemba, despite this, considers accepting her. We now witness the crucial change that Nko undergoes. She is no more a timid and submissive character, who wants to be an obedient wife, but rather she has grown into a woman with specific professional ambitions and goals, and she is determined to pursue them single-mindedly. She decides to keep her illegitimate baby and finish her University degree. She emerges as a woman who does not allow discriminatory customs to affect her life or that of her child. Emecheta discusses in this novel the politics of virginity and the experience of having children outside marriage, which has differing rules and consequences for men and for women. Ete Kemba tells Miss Bulewo "I am a man. I can do what I like. A man can raise his own bastard, women are not allowed to do that,"⁹⁶ and in reply Miss Bulewo says, "[o]r you mean to tell me that having children out of wedlock is another masculine preserve?"⁹⁷ This does not mean that Emecheta is encouraging women to have children outside marriage. Rather she is questioning why men are superior than women. Nko is rejected by her boyfriend because 'he was not sure that [she] was a virgin when [they] first made love. [...] he wanted enough blood to float his whole village.'⁹⁸ Her friend Julia

⁹⁵ Emecheta, *Double Yoke*, p. 65.

⁹⁶ Emecheta, *Double Yoke*, p. 157.

⁹⁷ Emecheta, *Double Yoke*, p. 157.

⁹⁸ Emecheta, *Double Yoke*, p. 151.

immediately responds: 'Did you ask him if he were a virgin too?'⁹⁹ Virginity is not important for the survival of the marriage and a relationship. For Emecheta 'being virtuous or not virtuous has nothing to do with the heart or the survival of the marriage. If both partners compromise and complement each other, the marriage can work.'¹⁰⁰ Ete begins to realise that they need to resolve their problems. Ete's feelings of affection for Nko, despite initial blindness caused by deep-rooted traditional hierarchies, help him to understand that they need to accept each other as equal. This shows growth on the part of Ete and also reflects his journey out of antiquated indigenous traditions and customs which act as a brake on meaningful cultural change. Emecheta's brand of feminist critique in her discussion of marriage comes close to Ogundipe-Leslie's stiwanism, where women must be included alongside men in the socio-political transformation of Africa. Like Ogundipe-Leslie, Emecheta is not against indigenous cultures; rather she argues for social transformation from within traditional spaces. Emecheta supports marriage as an institution as long as both women and men have equal share of responsibilities and power. Emecheta's critique of marriage differs radically from key western feminists such as Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, and Betty Friedan, who argue for the complete eradication of marriage as an institution.

According to Catherine Acholonu, '[t]he rejection of marriage and all it stands for, runs through all her novels.'¹⁰¹ Afam Ebeogu makes a similar claim that Emecheta has a negative view of marriage because of her own personal experience.¹⁰² I disagree with these views. There is no doubt that there are very few positive instances of marriage in Emecheta's work. Aku-nna is the only heroine who was happy in her marriage because it was a choice she herself made - nobody imposed the decision on her; but then she dies.

⁹⁹ Emecheta, *Double Yoke*, p. 151.

¹⁰⁰ Davidson Umeh, Marie Umeh, 'An Interview with Buchi Emecheta', *Ba Shiru*, 12.2 (1985), p. 23.

¹⁰¹ Catherine Acholonu, 'Buchi Emecheta', in *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the Present*, 2 vols (Lagos: Guardian Books, 1988), p. 221.

¹⁰² See Afam Ebeogu, 'Enter the Iconoclast: Buchi Emecheta and the Igbo Culture', *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 7.2 (1985), p. 89.

The premature demise of the only woman in the novel to achieve contentment through her own agency indicates that women still have a long way to go to achieve their goals.

Marriage, in most of Emecheta's work, functions as an institution to curtail women's independence. As Emecheta observes: 'Personally I'd like to see the ideal, happy marriage. But if it doesn't work, for goodness sake call it off.'¹⁰³ But in order to get out from a bad marriage, women need to be economically independent and therefore Emecheta puts a huge emphasis on education.

The Concept of Motherhood in Emecheta's Fiction

Emecheta's work, like Bâ's, rejects only those traditions and practices which are prejudiced towards women and are working to destroy their humanity: 'You can inherit your brother's wife and even your father's wife if she is still young – that is, can still bear children.'¹⁰⁴ Emecheta condemns the evolving forms of collective identity which value women only as producers of children, and particularly male children, where '[a] beautiful child belongs to the father. A sick and ugly one belongs to the mother'¹⁰⁵ a society where 'a girl child is conditioned right from birth into seeing her main role as that of wife and mother.'¹⁰⁶

Emecheta stresses the female protagonist's self-perception/political self-positioning, and her responsibility for self-improvement and self-empowerment. In a conversation with Adimora-Ezeigbo, Emecheta said in this respect: 'Child-bearing and rearing takes only a little of a woman's life. What does she spend the rest of her life doing? She must explore her individuality. [...] It is immoral for a woman to subjugate herself. She should be punished.'¹⁰⁷ Emecheta does not deny the significance of marriage and motherhood in Nigerian society. Aku-nna is happy in her marriage in *The Bride Price*, and

¹⁰³ Umeh and Umeh, 'An Interview with Buchi Emecheta', p. 23.

¹⁰⁴ Emecheta, 'Family Structures', in *Our Own Freedom*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁵ Emecheta, 'Child Care and Health', in *Our Own Freedom*, p. 36.

¹⁰⁶ Emecheta, 'Introduction', p. 8.

¹⁰⁷ Ezeigbo, 'Conversation with Buchi Emecheta', in *Gender Issues in Nigeria*, p. 91.

Gwendolen does not resent her motherhood; both marriage and motherhood are the choices they made, and thus do not inundate their individual identities. However, Emecheta exposes the predicaments in the lives of her protagonists, whose troubles are initiated by the conflict between personal ambitions and sanctioned social standards of conduct. *The Joys of Motherhood* does not represent 'the joys of motherhood', but rather exposes the real experiences of African mothers. Emecheta does not adhere to the powerful myths of motherhood in African writings.

Barbara Christian argues that '[i]ronically the experience unique to women is interpreted through male authorities and structures, through religion, myth, science, politics, and economics.'¹⁰⁸ Regardless of a woman's talents, ambitions, and desires, she is forced to her 'primary function — that of motherhood.'¹⁰⁹ According to Emecheta, a young female child 'is brought up to think that without children, she is not a full woman.'¹¹⁰ Therefore, a woman only sees herself as a mother, and that role of a mother not only becomes her identity but also her ambition, since only through motherhood she can become an accepted member of her society.

Emecheta's portrayal of motherhood in her work dissects and analyses Ogunyemi's claim about African women's obsession with having children. This obsession is an important part of Ogunyemi's womanism. However, Emecheta's work argues that this obsession has been taught to women by male-centred Nigerian society through folklore and indigenous traditions. Emecheta's 'nego-feminsim' here negotiates motherhood as an independent choice and not as an imposed institution. We first encounter Nnu Ego, the protagonist of *The Joys of Motherhood*, on a Lagos street one morning, in a state of

¹⁰⁸ Barbara Christian, 'An Angle of Seeing: Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*', in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), p. 212; In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich emphasises the historical reality that while motherhood is the experience of women, the institution of motherhood is under male control and that the potential of women to be mothers condition their entire life. See Adrienne Rich, 'The "Sacred Calling"', in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1977), pp. 41-43.

¹⁰⁹ Christian, 'An Angle of Seeing', p. 214.

¹¹⁰ Emecheta, 'Introduction', p. 8.

suicidal despair. Nnu Ego feels ‘pain in her young and unsupported breasts, now filling fast with milk since the birth of her baby boy four weeks ago’ (p.8). Her mind is occupied with thoughts of ‘her baby [...] her baby!’ (p.8). When she involuntarily grabs her breasts, it is, ‘more for assurance of her motherhood than to ease their weight’ (p.8). Finally Nnu Ego wonders why ‘her chi, her personal god [...] had punished her so’ (p.9). This is a picture of a young woman, who is trying to end her life after the loss of her new-born son. The patriarchal society, with its fetishisation of motherhood as the sum of woman’s identity, has forced Nnu Ego to accept that her loss of motherhood means that she is no longer a woman. Nnu Ego fails to commit suicide, but no one around her at that time, tries to learn about the personal conditions and the mental agony that must have forced her to such an attempt. They are only concerned for her husband: ““You mean you have a baby at home yet you come here disgracing the man who paid for you to be brought into this town?”” (pp.61-62). However, after learning about the death of Nnu Ego’s infant son, they are relieved to find out that ““[s]he is not mad after all”” (p.62), since ‘they all agreed that a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman’ (p.62). This echoes Eustace Palmer’s words that man ‘is the standard and the point of reference in this society.[...] Women are clearly the underdogs, and they are supposed to be content if their man merely sleeps with them even if he fails to discharge his other obligations.’¹¹¹ Nnu Ego’s suicide attempt suggests that failure to produce children for one’s husband can be seen as an adequate reason for women’s psychosis and death. Motherhood is so deep-seated in Nnu Ego’s psyche that the alternative to the loss of her infant son is the loss of self.¹¹² That is why Emecheta argues for motherhood to be an experience of choice, not an imposition.

¹¹¹ Eustace Palmer, ‘The Feminine Point of View: Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*’, *African Literature Today*, 13 (1983), p. 40.

¹¹² Adrienne Rich criticises the damaging effects of institutionalised motherhood and patriarchy on women: ‘patriarchy would seem to require, not only that women shall assume the major burden of pain and self-denial for the furtherance of the species, but that a majority of that species – women – shall remain essentially unquestioning and unenlightened.’ See Rich, ‘The “Sacred Calling”’, in *Of Woman Born*, p. 43.

Motherhood as an institution in *The Joys of Motherhood* domesticates women. Nnu Ego's pregnancy establishes her womanhood, and her status as a useful and productive member of the society. As she declares: "I don't know how to be anything else but a mother" (p.222). Motherhood gives purpose and ambition to her life, without which she drifts into insanity. When she gets married the first time, she cannot get pregnant. Since the woman's main function is producing children for her husband's line, and Nnu Ego fails to do so, Amatoukwu turns her out into the field as a labourer: "I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. [...] if you can't produce sons, at least you can help harvest yams." (pp.32-33). And when the new wife produces the son, Amatoukwu completely abandons Nnu Ego and shows preference for a nursing mother and 'not giving the new wife a chance to wean her child before calling her into his hut' (p.33). Since Nnu Ego has failed to produce any male heir, her status as a senior wife cannot protect her from her husband's actions. When Nnu Ego marries Nnaife, her second husband, she is constantly troubled by the dream of babies being given or taken away from her by her chi. In the beginning of the marriage Nnu Ego considers Nnaife 'one of the inevitabilities of fate' (p.47). However, she tolerates Nnaife later, because he has given her children, 'has made [her] into a real woman – all [she] wants to be, a woman and a mother' (p.53). Nnu Ego's relationship with her husband revolves around her children, and Nnaife exists more as a father of her children than as a husband for herself. She accepts him as a 'father of her child, and the fact that this child was a son gave her a sense of fulfilment for the first time in her life' (p.54). Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi describes this fulfilment as 'maternal validation' which is important for 'women's physical and psychical well-being',¹¹³ and therefore Nnu Ego becomes suicidal when her first son dies. *The Joys of Motherhood* deals with the conflicts of motherhood. Florence Stratton observes that Emecheta uses chapter headings to depict

¹¹³ Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, '(Re) Constructing Identity and Subjectivity: Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Tsitsi Dangarembga', in *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 40.

the real picture of motherhood in *The Joys of Motherhood*. The first chapter of the novel 'The Mother' narrates Nnu Ego's attempted suicide following the death of her first baby. The second chapter 'The Mother's Mother' concludes by telling the death of Nnu Ego's mother, Ona, in childbirth, and the final chapter 'The Canonised Mother' describes the circumstances of Nnu Ego's own death:¹¹⁴ '[O]ne night, Nnu Ego lay down by the roadside, thinking that she had arrived home. She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her' (p.224). Emecheta quietly adds: 'So busy had she been building up her joys as a mother' (p.224) that she had no time to indulge in friendship. Nnu Ego's arduous old age and lonely death by the roadside are in stark contrast to her hopes and dreams about her 'motherhood' and the idea of old age: 'She was now sure, as she bathed her baby son and cooked for her husband, that her old age would be happy' (p.54). Nnu Ego has three sons and four daughters, yet she dies alone. Nnu Ego died alone but she 'had the noisiest and most costly second burial Ibuza had ever seen, and a shrine was made in her name, so that her grandchildren could appeal to her should they be barren' (p.224).

The Joys of Motherhood ends with the information that Nnu Ego, in death, is considered as a 'wicked woman' (p.224) as although 'many people appealed to her to make women fertile, she never did' (p.224). Nancy Hartsock argues that 'when marginalized others' begin to demand the right to name themselves, they are demanding the right 'to act as subjects rather than objects of history', and through this 'the concept of subjecthood becomes "problematic."'¹¹⁵ Nnu Ego, in her death, is saving other women from re-living her brutalising experiences. Having blindly believed in motherhood, she is now retaliating, and refusing to accept the patriarchal definition of woman as mother. Therefore, she is not displaying a unified identity but rather 'multiplicities [...] without

¹¹⁴ See Florence Stratton, 'Room for Women', in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 113.

¹¹⁵ Nancy Hartsock, 'Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories', *Cultural Critique*, 7 (1987), p. 196.

freezing identities',¹¹⁶ by refusing to 'answer prayers for children' (p.224). By doing this, she disavows the normative demands of a society - which defines woman using a restricted terminology.

Florence Stratton argues that Emecheta's realism lies in the portrayal of her characters' inseparability from their social and historical contexts.¹¹⁷ Emecheta's unblinking, severe and pragmatic outlook on life is her answer to the biased and prejudiced traditions in Nigerian society, especially the imposed institution of motherhood: "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not any one's appendage?" (p.186) contemplates Nnu Ego. And after having children, her responsibilities toward them never end: 'Her love and duty for her children was like her chain of slavery' (p.186). Being a mother, 'she was supposed to be happy in her poverty, in her nail biting agony, in her churning stomach, in her rage, in her cramped room [...] oh, it was a confusing world' (p.167). Emecheta lays bare the cultural conditioning which fosters maternal self-denial and self-sacrifice: 'Nnu Ego realised that part of the pride of motherhood was to look a little unfashionable and be able to drawl with joy: "I can't afford another outfit, because I am nursing him, so you see I can't go anywhere to sell anything"' (p.80). Nnu Ego learns at a very early age that the patriarchal expectations cannot be challenged outright. During her first marriage, she does not question the abuse which she suffers because of her assumed infertility. In these circumstances, Nnu Ego cannot be reconciled with herself without having any children. Therefore till the very end of the novel, it remains difficult for her to sever herself from the cultural anchorages that fix her a second class citizen. However, Nnu Ego eventually realises the fraud in the ideal of motherhood, which patriarchy propagates for its own selfish motives. Nnu Ego says:

¹¹⁶ Donna Haraway, 'Reading Buchi Emecheta: Contests for Women's Experience in Women's Studies', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 1.3 (1990), pp. 250-251.

¹¹⁷ See Stratton, 'Room for Women', p. 113; See also Marie Umeh, 'African Women in Transition in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta', *Presence Africaine*, 116 (1980), pp. 190-201.

When will I be free? [...] Never, not even in death. I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband — and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which we women will always help to build. (p.187)

The miserable existence and the dire poverty of Nnu Ego's life call into question the foisted identity of motherhood. Emecheta excoriates the fabricated myth created by a culture which dictates that women actively seek motherhood, and that the experience is full of peace and tranquillity. Emecheta's unflinching portrayal of motherhood, when it is imposed on women as a tag of their identity, exposes the harsh realities of the lives of mothers. The above paragraph suggests that Nnu Ego finally realises that she has been programmed to think and act in certain ways for the benefit of the patriarchal structures of her society. However, realisation is not enough to change the condition of women; therefore, what Nnu Ego needs, according to Frank, is a 'new ego- what she so sorely needs and lacks.'¹¹⁸ Emecheta, like Bâ, wants women to develop a politically conscious identity in order to challenge misogynistic socio-cultural structures of Nigerian society. Bâ's *Ramatoulaye* criticises Senegalese society for preventing women from entering into the field of politics despite 'the militancy and ability of our women, their disinterested commitment, [which] have already been demonstrated.'"¹¹⁹ However, the class difference between *Ramatoulaye* and Nnu Ego has prevented Nnu Ego for most part of her life to perceive and question the gender based biases in Nigerian society.

¹¹⁸ Katherine Frank, 'The Death of the Slave Girl: African Womanhood in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 21.3 (1982), p. 492.

¹¹⁹ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, pp. 63-64.

Nnu Ego is born of a mother, Ona, whom Emecheta describes as ‘a very beautiful young woman who managed to combine stubbornness with arrogance’ (p.11). Ona is criticised by the women of her village for being ‘[a] woman who was troublesome and impetuous, who had the audacity to fight with her man before letting him have her: a bad woman’ (p.21). Ona’s father, Obi Umunna, has no sons. He wants Ona to bear sons for him, so he refuses to give her in marriage. Ona respects her father’s wishes, and does not marry Agbadi. However, she makes a pact with her father that if she has a female child, she will give that child to Agbadi, but if she has a male child, she will give him to her father. Agbadi, who is a passionate man as a lover, and with whom Emecheta has created a powerful sexual scene in the novel (pp.19-21), is insensitive and indifferent as a husband towards his wives. When his senior wife falls ill, whom he neglects in order to make love to Ona (p.21), he praises her not as a wife, but as the mother of her sons, again motherhood becomes her only identity through which she will be appreciated and valued: ““Your mother is a good woman. So unobtrusive, so quiet”” (p.22).

Ona is presented as a ‘deviant’ and subversive figure in the novel who does not live her life within or adhere to traditional gender roles and responsibilities. However, she cannot be considered as a free empowered woman. Her father, another patriarch, wants her to produce sons for him, so whether she is a wife or not, her primary function is to produce children, and especially sons. Emecheta has presented Ona as an iconoclast and it is her dissident verve that attracts Agbadi, who makes her pregnant and then she dies while giving birth to Nnu Ego. Barbara Christian argues that ‘it is motherhood that forces Ona to give up her independence and finally kills her.’¹²⁰ But does it mean that Emecheta is against motherhood? Her work suggests otherwise. *The Joys of Motherhood* is condemning the idealisation and romanticisation of motherhood. Emecheta is juxtaposing the real experiences of motherhood (Nnu Ego’s miserable life and lonely death) with the myth of

¹²⁰ Christian, ‘An Angle of Seeing’, p. 229.

African motherhood (pure and invigorating Mother Africa), which Nnu Ego's society forces women to aspire to. Chikwenye Ogunyemi argues that 'the Nigerian woman does not mind parenting; in fact, she looks forward to it as something meaningful in a very harsh world [...] to be a mother, or not to be a mother is not even the question. [...] Exile is the hard mother who disciplined Emecheta. From this harsh experience, she sees motherhood as a burden.'¹²¹ Ogunyemi's reading is blinkered. Emecheta, a mother of five, dedicated her novel *Second-Class Citizen* to her children:

To my dear Children
 Florence, Sylvester, Jake, Christy and Alice,
 without whose sweet background noises
 this book would not have been written.¹²²

This dedication even surprises Alice Walker: 'What kind of a woman would think the "background noises" of five children "sweet." I thought the dedication might camouflage the author's unadmitted maternal guilt, but Emecheta is a writer and a mother, and it is because she is both that she writes at all.'¹²³ Her children become the inspiration for her writing. She does not consider them and her writing career as two opposing entities. Her children are an integral part of her career. *Second-Class Citizen* is an autobiographical novel, which portrays painful circumstances in the life of Adah (Emecheta): 'Francis is physically abusive out of frustration at not passing the exams he came to England to study for; Adah's countrymen and women are rude and unhelpful because they consider Adah, with her first class job as a show-off; Adah's pregnancies are hard, and her children are often sick. Finally she leaves her useless and abusive husband.'¹²⁴ However, despite having a life full of horrors, Adah still has a soft spot for her husband: 'But even if she had

¹²¹ Ogunyemi, 'An Excursion into Woman's (S)(p)ace', in *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, pp. 78-79.

¹²² Buchi Emecheta, *Second-Class Citizen* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishes, 1994).

¹²³ Alice Walker, 'A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of, Her Children', in *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*, ed. Moyra Davey (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), p. 99-100.

¹²⁴ Walker, 'A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of, Her Children', p. 101.

nothing to thank Francis for [...] she could still thank him for giving her own children, because she had never really had anything of her own before.’¹²⁵ And this recalls Nnu Ego’s feelings of affection for her second husband Nnaife after having her children. For Emecheta motherhood is not a hindrance but when it becomes a consuming identity, it becomes an impediment.

Susan Griffin argues that ‘when the children grow up and leave home, if the mother has sacrificed herself to them, she now loses it entirely. The person she gave herself to has now abandoned her. Her loss is absolute.’¹²⁶ Nnu Ego’s loss as a mother is absolute as she believed that ‘[t]he joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children’ (p.224). The joys of motherhood eventually lead to Nnu Ego’s death at the end of the novel. However, Emecheta’s character Kehinde as a mother in *Kehinde* does not lose herself entirely to her children. When Kehinde’s son Joshua asks her if being a mother she is supposed to live for her children, Kehinde replies: “‘I did, when you were young. My whole life was wound around your needs, but now you are a grown man! Mothers are people too, you know.’”¹²⁷ She further tells her son that she loves him, but now she does not have the energy “‘to be the carrier of everybody’s burdens any more’”,¹²⁸ and that claiming the right to live her life does not make her “‘less of a mother, not less of a woman.’”¹²⁹ When Adeola James asks Emecheta about the fundamental and essential questions in her creative works, she replies: ‘First of all I try to ask: why are women as they are? Why are they so pathetic?’¹³⁰ In an interview with David Umeh and Marie Umeh, she repeats that her ‘main criticism is of women enslaving themselves.’¹³¹ In her work she questions the institutions of motherhood and marriage and how they have been used to

¹²⁵ Emecheta, *Second-Class Citizen*, p. 37.

¹²⁶ Susan Griffin, ‘Feminism and Motherhood’, in *Mother Reader*, p. 37.

¹²⁷ Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1994), p. 139.

¹²⁸ Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p. 139.

¹²⁹ Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p. 141.

¹³⁰ Adeola James, Buchi Emecheta, ‘Buchi Emecheta’, in *In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk*, ed. Adeola James (London: James Currey, 1990), p. 42.

¹³¹ Umeh and Umeh, ‘Interview with Buchi Emecheta’, p. 22.

enslave women, and how important it is for women to break all taboos and myths which are confining them.

Nnu Ego admits that ‘the trouble with [her] is that [she] find it difficult to change’ (p.127). She realises very late that rather than becoming a poor victim, she could have been an active agent for cultural change. At the end of her life, she realises the fraud behind the myths of ‘motherhood’, the ‘good wife’, and the ‘good woman.’ *The Joys of Motherhood* emphasises that women must develop survival strategies, and this is what Adaku, Nnu Ego’s co-wife does. Both Nnu Ego and their kinsman Nwakousar reminded Adaku:

‘Don’t you know that according to the custom of our people you, Adaku, the daughter of whoever you are, are committing an unforgiveable sin?’ Nwakousar reminded her. ‘Our life starts from immortality and ends in immortality. If Nnaife had been married to only you, you would have ended his life on this ground of his visiting earth. I know you have children, but they are girls, who in a few years’ time will go and help build another man’s immortality. The only woman who is immortalising your husband you make unhappy with your fine clothes and lucrative business.’ (p.166)

Adaku is referred to as ‘the daughter of whoever you are’, as she has not produced any sons for her husband. She does not fulfil the normative demands of her male-dominated society, and therefore she is reduced to the level of ‘nobody.’ Her other achievements – for example, successfully establishing and managing her own business – amount to nothing in a society which does not allow women to define themselves as creative and resourceful entities outside matrimony and motherhood. However, Adaku retaliates against these fixed identities, and takes a bold decision for herself and also for the future of her daughters. Instead of becoming a passive victim of the society like Nnu Ego, she rebels and decides that she will not let discriminatory social practices shape her daughters’ future. She

remarks: ““I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons. [...] I am going to be thrown away when I am dead, in any case, whereas people like you, senior wife, have formed roots [...] yet the more I think about it the more I realise that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have to set my own.”” (p. 169)

Adaku turns to prostitution. It is a brave step against the insult which has been inflicted upon her only because she does not have a son. However, it is difficult to associate independence and freedom with prostitution, where women also lose their dignity as their bodies are commodified. The text offers some ironic parallels between prostitution and marriage. When Nnu Ego bemoans a lack of affection from her husband Nnaife, her friend Ato reminds her that ‘[m]any men can make love and give babies easily but cannot love’ (p. 75), and states that she therefore should not complain. Nnu Ego’s gain out of loveless sex in the ‘urine-stained mats on her bug-ridden bed’ (p. 169) is her motherhood; while Adaku’s profit out of callous sex is monetary which will enable her daughters to attend school. Eustace Palmer regards Adaku as ‘a forerunner of women’s liberation in Africa,’¹³² and Catherine Obianuju Acholonu considers her to be ‘Emecheta’s ideal woman.’¹³³ I disagree with these views. Rather I concur with Julia Inyang Essien Oku’s opinion that Adaku ‘can only attain independence by becoming a prostitute; thereby breaking from one restrictive identity closure, only to move into the confines provided by conforming to another stereotype.’¹³⁴ Adaku declares: ““I want to be a dignified single woman, I shall work to educate my daughters, though I shall not do so without male companionship. [...] They do have their uses”” (p.171). As a wife to Nnaife, she cannot

¹³² Palmer, ‘The Feminine Point of View’, in *African Literature Today*, p. 49.

¹³³ Acholonu, ‘Buchi Emecheta’, in *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature*, p. 221.

¹³⁴ Julia Inyang Essien Oku, ““Courtesans and Earthmothers”: A Feminist Reading of Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Jagua Nana’s Daughter* and Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*”, in *Critical Theory and African Literature*, ed. Ernest Emenyonu, R. Vanamali, E. Oko, and Azubike Festus Iloje (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1987), pp. 230-231.

ask him to pay for the sex, but now she is making her slavery pay. However the aim of becoming 'a single dignified woman' is a noble aim and Adaku's daughters' education might help them to achieve that goal.

But is the text offering prostitution as a partial solution for women who are suffering in their marriages? This episode of Adaku stresses the importance of education for women. Adaku becomes a prostitute because she is an uneducated woman and has few options. Susan Z. Andrade observes that in her text Emecheta does not give details about Adaku's prostitution, only offers her decision.¹³⁵ Andrade posits that 'Adaku's departure from the Owulum family and her brief period of prostitution may be read as a strategy [...] to accumulate enough capital'¹³⁶ for her business and the education of her daughters. In stark contrast are Nnu Ego's daughters, who drop out of their primary school after a few years in order to give preference to their brothers' education, who will eventually not only abandon them but also their mother, Nnu Ego. Adaku is educating her daughters so they don't have to endure the same humiliations and enabling them to support themselves and their family.¹³⁷ Adaku is firm in giving her daughters a good start in life through education: 'I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life. They shall stop going to the market with me. I shall see that they get enrolled in a good school. [...] Nnaife is not going to send them away to any husband before they are ready. I will see to that! I am leaving this stuffy room tomorrow senior wife' (p.212). In order to achieve these goals for her daughters, her only available option, being an uneducated and poor woman, is prostitution.

Prostitution is not a choice for Adaku. It is a reaction against a society which is punishing her for not producing a male child. The text suggests that independence comes

¹³⁵ See Susan Z. Andrade, 'Rewriting History, Motherhood, and Rebellion: Naming an African Women's Literary Tradition', *Research in African Literatures*, 21.1 (1990), p. 103.

¹³⁶ Andrade, 'Rewriting History, Motherhood, and Rebellion', p. 103.

¹³⁷ According to Emecheta education can help in improving women's status in the society. See Joyce Boss, 'Women and Empowerment: An Interview with Buchi Emecheta', *UFAHAMU: Journal of the African Activist Association*, 16.2 (1988), p. 99.

through education, which will liberate women from their dependence on the male relatives in their life. This will enable women's struggles against oppressive patriarchal structures to be more effective. Egyptian author Nawal El Saadawi also decries the institution of marriage in *Woman at Point Zero*:

All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows. Now I realized that the least deluded of all women was the prostitute. That marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women [...] men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another.

Because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife.¹³⁸

Firdaus' choice of prostitution is also a reaction against an oppressive patriarchal Egyptian society. At the outset, the novel charts her ambition to attend university. But her parents' death, sexual molestation by her uncle and finally physical and mental torture by her aged husband Sheikh Mahmud lead her to the path of prostitution. Towards the end of the novel when her pimp demands more than half of Firdaus's money she murders him. But her act also surprises her and she asks herself: 'Why was it that I had never stabbed a man before?'¹³⁹ She realises that she had always been afraid of men and this fear was crushed when for the first time in her life she saw fear in a man's eyes. These novels do not present murders and prostitution as solutions for women's oppressed conditions; rather, they seem to suggest that independence can only be secured by violating established laws. Emecheta's work emphasises the potential of women to dismantle the rigidly conceived

¹³⁸ Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, pp. 94, 97.

¹³⁹ Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, p. 104.

social structures in order to create a more equitable culture for both Nigerian men and women. Emecheta is bold in questioning customs and traditions and dealing with taboo subjects. Her work clearly suggests that certain traditional practices are discriminatory against women but the elimination of these does not mean the condemnation of the whole Nigerian culture. According to Emecheta, '[t]o completely say "no" to that culture would be a denial of my own personality.'¹⁴⁰ What she subjects to withering scrutiny is the misuse of these institutions to consolidate male power and privilege by denigrating and abusing wives, mothers and daughters.

¹⁴⁰ Joyce Boss, 'Women and Empowerment', p. 94.

**Women at War: The Nigerian Civil War in Buchi Emecheta's
Destination Biafra (1982), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a
Yellow Sun* (2006)**

The Nigerian civil war is now history. The Republic of Biafra lives in the pages of books, pamphlets, and newspapers. In that form, it is no threat to the people of Nigeria who, in a solemn oath of allegiance in January 1979, pledged to consign Biafra into oblivion and face the task of reconstruction and reconciliation. Biafra is now an issue only for historians who are plagued with the search for an answer to 'what might have happened if...' But the war itself has left deep scars not only upon the lives of survivors, but also on their beliefs and attitudes towards life...¹

Without the women, the Nigerian vandals would have overrun Biafra: without the women, our gallant Biafran soldiers would have died of hunger in the war fronts. Without the women, the Biafran Red Cross would have collapsed.²

The Politics of Ethnicities and Oil in the Nigerian Civil War

On May 30, 1976, Lt. Colonel C. Odumegwu Ojukwu, declared the secession of the eastern region of Nigeria, and announced the creation of an independent republic of Biafra. Nigeria was divided into four regions during the British rule; the north, the west, the mid-west and the east. There were three major ethnic groups which dominated the country and played a crucial role in the power struggle, which contributed to the Nigerian civil war. The Hausa dominated the north, the Yoruba were in majority in the west, and the Igbo were in domination in the east. On January 15, 1966, Nigeria witnessed its first military coup which ended the civilian government, and Major Ironsi became the head of the new federal military government. However, due to the extreme politicisation of ethnic groups in the army, this coup led to another military overthrow and the death of Major Ironsi, and established Lt. Colonel Gowon as the new military leader of Nigeria.³ However, things did

¹ Ernest Nneji Emenyonu, 'Post-War Writing in Nigeria', *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, 3.2 (1973), p. 49.

² Flora Nwapa, *Wives at War* (Enugu: TANA Press, 1980), p. 13.

³ I am drawing on the works of Alfred Obiora Uzokwe, *Surviving in Biafra: The Story of the Nigerian Civil War: Over Two Million Died* (New York: Writers Advantage, 2003); Toyin Falola, Matthew M. Heaton, 'Instability and Civil War, 1960-1970', in *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 158-181; James Booth, *Writers and Politics in Nigeria* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1981); Charles Nixon, 'Self-Determination: The Nigeria/Biafra Cause', *World Politics*, 24.4 (1972), pp. 473-

not stop here. During this political turmoil in Nigeria, there were also rumours that the first military coup was planned by the Igbo soldiers of the army to seize control of the whole country. These rumours created mass hysteria, which resulted in the massacre of 30,000 to 50,000 Igbos in the Hausa dominated north. The federal government of Nigeria at that time did not make efforts to protect Igbos in the north or provide adequate compensation for the victims. As a result of these events, Lt. Colonel Ojukwu, the military commander of the eastern region of Nigeria, called Igbos home. This call to return home resulted in the mass departure of almost two million Igbos from the northern regions of the country to the east. Meanwhile, the new military leader of Nigeria, Lt. Colonel Gowon, refused any assurance of security to Igbos in other parts of the country, and decided to split Nigeria into twelve states. All these events led to the secession of the eastern region and the resultant civil war which lasted for three years, claiming almost two million lives.⁴

Ken Saro-Wiwa argued that the Igbo-led secession was not embraced by all Biafrans.⁵ According to Saro-Wiwa, most of the Igbos endorsed Ojukwu and secession, but many minorities in the east were not comfortable with the Igbo domination, and therefore did not support Biafra. Saro-Wiwa indicated that the Ogoni people, who live in the Niger Delta, were indecisive about the secession and suffered greatly, because ‘they live on oil-bearing land, are a minority, and are therefore ready candidates for genocide.’⁶ In Saro-Wiwa’s opinion, the federal government did not provide Ogoni people with any security during the civil war, and consequently ‘thirty thousand Ogonis (or over ten per cent of the

497; and Joseph Okpaku, *Nigeria: Dilemma of Nationhood: An African Analysis of the Biafran Conflict* (New York: Third Press, 1972).

⁴ See Maxine Sample, ‘In Another World: The Refugee Phenomenon in Two Novels of the Nigerian Civil War’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 37.3 (1991), pp. 445-454; Christie Achebe, ‘Igbo Women in the Nigerian-Biafran War 1967-1970’, *Journal of Black Studies*, 40.5 (2010), pp. 785-811; Chinua Achebe, ‘Chinua Achebe on Biafra’, *Transition*, 36 (1968), pp. 31-38; and Eno Blackson Ikpe, ‘Migration, Starvation, and Humanitarian Intervention During the Nigerian Civil War’, <http://www.ajol.info/index.php/lhr/article/viewFile/32538/23851> [accessed 11th April 2012].

⁵ See Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (London, Lagos & Port Harcourt: Saros International Publishers, 1992).

⁶ Saro-Wiwa, ‘Civil War’, p. 43.

ethnic group) died in the war.’⁷ The federal government allowed Shell BP to continue its exploitation in the Ogoni region, as it needed profits from oil to conduct the increasingly bitter and violent civil war. At that particular moment, ‘the Nigerian elite appears to have hearts of stone and the brains of millipedes; because Shell is a multi-national company with the ability to crush whomever it wishes; because the petroleum resources of the Ogoni serve everyone’s greed.’⁸

Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka on the Nigerian Civil War

Chinua Achebe revisits the history of his country and the Nigerian civil war in his work, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983). The purpose of this revision is to find answers as to why this civil war happened and to ask how Nigeria as a nation can save itself from future disasters resulting from a dangerous combination of ethnic unrest, widespread governmental corruption, military in-fighting and the interference of former colonial powers. The man who in 1968 found Nigeria ‘untenable’ no longer found Nigeria ‘untenable’⁹ in the wake of a damaging, destructive and divisive civil war. According to Achebe, ‘[t]he trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership.’¹⁰ He adds:

One of the commonest manifestations of under-development is a tendency among the ruling elite to live in a world of make-believe and unrealistic expectations. This is the *cargo cult* mentality [...] a belief by backward people that someday, without any exertion whatsoever on their part, a fairy ship will dock in their harbour laden with every goody they have always dreamed of possessing.

⁷ Saro-Wiwa, ‘Civil War’, p. 43.

⁸ Saro-Wiwa, ‘Author’s Note’, p. 7.

⁹ Achebe’s 1968 interview showed complete support for Biafra. On the one hand he embodies the sense of betrayal that spread throughout an entire generation of Igbos, and on the other hand, he gives early evidence of belonging and pride that came from moving to Biafra and identifying oneself with one’s people. ‘I realized’, he writes, ‘that I had not been living in my home; I had been living in a strange place. The most vital feeling of Biafra now [that is, in 1968] is that they are at home [...] and you can see this in the effort that people are putting into war.’ See ‘Chinua Achebe on Biafra’, *Transition*, 36 (1968), pp. 31-68.

¹⁰ Achebe, ‘Where the Problem Lies’, in *The Trouble with Nigeria* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1984), p. 1.

Listen to Nigerian leaders and you will frequently hear the phrase *this great country of ours*.¹¹

Achebe contends that these insincere leaders exploit their own people for the sake of power and money. Achebe believes that Nigeria's prospects for progress and stability will be brighter if 'Nigeria learns to deal fairly with all its citizens (including troublesome Igbo)'.¹² However, Nigeria's recent election proves Achebe's diagnosis that Nigeria suffers from the lack of true leadership and a lamentable failure to put in place the frameworks for free and fair elections.¹³ These free elections, according to Achebe, will nurture the democratic process, which will subsequently pave the way for a true and honest leadership.¹⁴

Achebe's short story 'The Voter' from the *Girls at War* volume describes Nigerian politics in terms of bribery, shallow materialism, and the politicisation of ethnicities. Marcus Ibe, who started his life as a 'not too successful mission school teacher'¹⁵ in a village called Umuofia, is now Chief the Honourable. He was minister of culture in the outgoing government with two large luxury cars and the 'biggest house anyone had seen in these parts'.¹⁶ But the condition of his village remains the same. There is neither running water nor electricity, although he lately installed a private plant to supply electricity to his new house. Now he is again running for election and his agent Roof is giving money to village people to cast their votes for him. But when the opposing party approaches Roof

¹¹ Achebe, 'False Images of Ourselves', in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, p. 9.

¹² Achebe, 'The Igbo Problem', in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, p. 50.

¹³ In the April 2011 Presidential election, violence erupted in Nigeria and the police gave figures for only two of the five states affected by the violence. The police said that 520 people including six policemen were killed in Kaduna and Niger, 81 others were wounded and 22,000 were displaced from their homes and communities. The presidential inauguration banquet turned sour on 29th May when a bomb exploded near the nation's capital, Abuja, and in Bauchi and Zaria - both in northern Nigeria. No fewer than 14 lives were taken by bombers. Two days later in the south-east police officers reportedly ambushed a convoy of vehicles taking a large number of Biafran loyalists to the city of Owerri to celebrate the 44th anniversary of the declaration of the short-lived secessionist state. They denied killing three of those Biafra loyalists but admitted arresting 300 of them, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12881634> [accessed 13th April 2012]; see also Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 253.

¹⁴ Achebe, *There Was a Country*, p. 253.

¹⁵ Chinua Achebe, 'The Voter', in *Girls at War* (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 10.

¹⁶ Achebe, 'The Voter', p. 10.

and offers him more money (five pounds as compared to a few shillings), he switches his political allegiance: 'He placed five pounds on the floor before Roof and said, "We want your vote." [...] The brief exercise gave him enough time to weigh the proposition. As he spoke his eyes never left the red notes on the floor. He seemed to be mesmerized by the picture of the cocoa farmer harvesting his crops.'¹⁷ The 'red' notes suggest blood money, or the life-blood of a community draining away as a consequence of the actions of its supposed leaders, who are mired in corruption and driven principally by squalid self-interests. Roof finally accepts the money, and gives his vote to the opposing party whom he initially called 'the enemy.'

It is the promise of money, and not the moral credibility and reliability of each party, which determines the voters' support. Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* is the result of the same 'cesspool of corruption and misrule'¹⁸ which inspired Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966). Okereke observes that *Destination Biafra* begins the story of political misconduct in Nigeria from where Achebe stops in *A Man of the People*.¹⁹ James Booth argues that the military coup which ends *A Man of the People* is inevitable and not simply a convenient plot device to extricate Achebe from a situation to which he can see no organic solution.²⁰ According to Booth, Achebe conveys very clearly the misuse of power and failure of the democratic process by the corruption of political parties, and within less than a month of the book's publication in January 1966 a military coup occurred in Nigeria.²¹ James explains that many non-Igbos suspected that Achebe knew of the coup in

¹⁷ Achebe, 'The Voter', p. 13.

¹⁸ Chinua Achebe, 'The African Writer and the Biafran Cause', in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 83.

¹⁹ See Grace Eche Okereke, 'The Nigerian Civil War and the Female Imagination in Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*', in *Feminism in African Literature: Essays on Criticism*, ed. Helen Chukwuma (Enugu: New Generation, 1994), p. 146; In *A Man of the People* Nigeria has been referred to as a 'national cake' and everyone is fighting to get a larger piece. This greed and chaos become worse, and eventually pave the way for a military coup. See Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1988), p. 12.

²⁰ See James Booth, "Distress and Difficulty": Chinua Achebe', in *Writers and Politics in Nigeria* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1981), p. 106.

²¹ Booth, "Distress and Difficulty", p. 106.

advance and therefore deliberately anticipated it in the novel, which is ‘a naive and unnecessary deduction.’²² This suspicion by non-Igbos also reflects the seminal role that ethnicity played in the Nigerian civil war. Booth avers that an ‘observer seeking hard evidence of the existence of a “Nigerian” culture must conclude that there is as yet no such thing: only Ibo culture, Yoruba culture, Hausa culture, etc.’²³

Wole Soyinka opposed Biafran secession in 1967. However, when Chief Abiola was denied office, following the election victory of 12 June 1993, Soyinka changed his political and philosophical stance on Biafra: ‘I frankly could not advance any invulnerable reason for my preference for a solution that did not involve disintegration.’²⁴ On 7 July 1998, after Chief Abiola’s mysterious death under prison guard, Soyinka expressed his reservations on the future of Nigeria as one nation: ‘Alas, if that election of June 12 proves indeed to be ancient history, then – and do take this as prophecy – Nigeria as a nation has no future history.’²⁵ Corrupt governments, coups and counter-coups, and the rigging of elections are a few of the major causes of the Nigerian civil war. Soyinka’s doubt about Nigeria’s unity in 1998 suggests that Nigeria is still plagued by the same problems which caused the war eighteen years earlier. Therefore it is important to accept the reality of the 1967 civil war in order to avoid another war in Nigeria. Selective amnesia regarding Biafra hinders not only the healing process, but the process whereby a nation understands and learns from its mistakes. Soyinka also inveighed against those who sought to erase the national and cultural importance of Biafra in the tangled history of Nigeria:

²² Booth, “Distress and Difficulty”, p. 106; ‘In a Convocational Lecture given at the University of Ife, December 15, 1978 Achebe drew attention to the fact that from the start of composition it takes at the very least two years for a novel to appear in print. It would be stretching plausibility to imagine a group of soldiers confiding their coup plans to a novelist, and then delaying their action for two years or more, so that it might coincide with the appearance of his book.’ Cited in James Booth, *Writers and Politics in Nigeria* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1981), p.182; see also Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

²³ Booth, ‘Perspectives’, p. 29.

²⁴ Wole Soyinka, ‘A Flawed Origin – But No Worse than Others’, in *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 31.

²⁵ Soyinka, ‘The National Question: Internal Imperatives’, pp. 131-132.

There are of course those dissenting biographers and historians, the Establishment record-keepers who insist on writing and speaking of Biafra in inverted commas, in a coy, sanctimonious denial of a reality. We should even encourage them to write it *B—ra* or invent any other childish contrivance, like a literary talisman programmed to create a lacuna in a history that dogs our conscience and collective memory; every day still reminds us that the factors that led to Biafra neither were ephemeral nor can be held to be permanently exorcised.²⁶

Buchi Emecheta, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's texts are working against such 'sanctimonious denial of a reality' by rendering episodes of war crime and rape; contributing to urgent debates about humanitarianism, punitive cruelty towards women and minors, imperial arrogance, and racial prejudice. They are contributing to a subversive eyewitness accounts which counteract the official policies of corrupt governments whose figureheads routinely deny or smother disturbing evidence of humanitarian wrongs.

Nigerian Women Writers and Civil War Literature

The Nigerian civil war is 'the bloodiest' moment in the history of post-colonial Nigeria, according to Ben Okri:

the carnage and waste of life has not been, and cannot be properly explained or made fully understandable. It was at once post-colonial eruption, that shed a lot of lurid light on the ugly manipulations of colonial powers, and at the same time it was violently internecine in a way that exploded and raised severe questions about the state of African nationhood. Though Nigeria has long launched into new phases of its history we have not fully – as a nation and as Africans – learnt and recovered from the idiocies, stupidities and horrifying implications of that era.²⁷

²⁶ Wole Soyinka, 'A Flawed Origin', p. 32.

²⁷ Ben Okri, 'Women in Male War', *West Africa*, 3371 (15 March, 1982), p. 727.

The western media offered extensive coverage of the Nigerian civil war. The faces of starving children on the cover of *Life* magazine and on ITV news reflected the horrors of Biafran tragedy.²⁸ Eldred Jones had suggested that this civil war provided a fertile ground for African writers, and many authors took it as their responsibility to confront the traumas synonymous with this internecine strife and subsequently produced 'a whole corpus of new novels.'²⁹ As Chidi Amuta, perhaps the leading critic of Nigerian civil war literature noted in 1983:

Although the war ended more than a decade ago, one of its most enduring and significant legacies is the numerous literary works it has generated and inspired. Apart from works based directly on the war situation such as Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), Okechukwa Mezu's *Behind the Rising Sun* (1971), Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* (1971) and *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), recent works such as Festus Iyayi's *Violence* (1979) and Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980) testify to a still lingering 'war consciousness.' The civil war constitutes the most important theme in Nigerian Literature (in English) in the 1970s.³⁰

However, the bulk of narrative prose fiction has been produced by the male authors. A preliminary checklist of primary and secondary sources on Nigerian civil war literature does not include a single woman writer.³¹ For Meredith Turshen, 'the enduring wartime

²⁸ *Life Magazine*, 12th July 1968, <http://oldlifemagazines.com/july-12-1968-life-magazine.html>, <http://images.google.com/hosted/life/?imgurl=fce0d6668c1c8605>, [accessed 11th April 2012]; ITV Late Evening News, 'Famine in Biafra', 12th July 1968, <http://jiscmediahub.ac.uk/record/display/039-00046921?mhevent=related> [accessed 11th April 2012]; On July 12th 1968, ITV reported about a Biafra refugee camp where children were dying of kwashiorkor (protein deficiency), had fleshless skulls, swollen bellies and overblown legs and ankles, <http://jiscmediahub.ac.uk/record/display/039-00047002?mhevent=related> [accessed 11th April 2012]; see also S. P. F. Hughes, 'Malnutrition in the Field: Nigerian Civil War 1968-69', *British Medical Journal*, 2 (1969), pp. 436-438.

²⁹ Eldred Jones, 'Editorial', *African Literature Today*, 13 (1983), p. viii.

³⁰ Chidi Amuta, 'The Nigerian Civil War and the Evolution of Nigerian Literature', in *Contemporary African Literature*, ed. Hal Wylie, Eileen Julien, and Russel J. Linnemann (Washington DC: Three Continents Press, 1983), p. 83.

³¹ See Craig McLuckie, 'Preliminary Checklist of Primary and Secondary Sources on Nigerian Civil War/Biafran War Literature', *Research in African Literatures*, 18.4 (1987), pp. 510-527.

picture of “man does, woman is” has depended on the invisibility of women’s participation in the war effort, their unacknowledged behind the lines contributions to the prosecution of war, and their hidden complicity in the construction of fighting forces.’³² Jean B. Elshtain avers that women’s narratives of war have not attained ‘*literary status*’, because ‘women are *exterior* to war, men *interior*, men have long been the great war-story tellers, legitimated in that role because they have “been there.”’³³ The myth that women cannot be legitimate narrators of the war as they ‘have not been there’, is complicated by Emecheta and Adichie’s narratives of the Nigerian civil war. Miriam Cooke argues that these ‘counter discourses’ by women writers will help in debunking their cultures’ misleading war myths: ‘The disenfranchised, who had submitted to the power of dominant discourse, which tended to distort their experiences, are making their voices heard and their faces seen. [...] Their counter-discourses disrupt the order of the body politic in such a way that they de-centre and fragment hegemonic discourse.’³⁴ In telling their side of the story, Emecheta and Adichie have disrupted the dominant male-centred discourses on the Nigerian civil war, and consequently their narratives have received harsh criticism.

According to Chinweizu, Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* ‘does not convey the feel of the experience that was Biafra. All it does is to leave one wondering why it falls so devastatingly below the quality of Buchi Emecheta’s work.’³⁵ In an interview Emecheta remarked that when she launched *Destination Biafra*, Chinweizu came to her and said, ““Buchi, I am going to ruin you.” I said, “Why? What did I do?” “Why should you be writing about what men are doing? Did you go to the war field?” I didn’t believe what he

³² Meredith Turshen, ‘Women’s War Stories’, in *What Women Do in Wartime: Gender and Conflict in Africa*, ed. Meredith Turshen and Clothilde Twagiramariya (London & New York: Zed Books, 1998), p. 1.

³³ Jean Bethke Elshtain, ‘Neither Warriors nor Victims: Men, Women, and Civic Life’, in *Women and War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 212.

³⁴ Miriam Cooke, ‘WO-man Retelling the War Myth’, in *Gendering War Talk*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 180.

³⁵ Chinweizu, ‘Times of Troubles’, *Times Literary Supplement* (February 26, 1982), p. 228.

said.³⁶ Abioseh M. Porter notes, ‘that some of the most celebrated attempts to discuss works dealing with the Nigerian-Biafra civil war – one of the predominant themes of modern African literature – have either ignored or underestimated the literary efforts of female writers.’³⁷

Without the female voice, a complete and nuanced picture of the Nigerian civil war cannot be achieved and a vital part of history (and testimony) is lost. This chapter considers Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* (1982) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). These authors carefully situate their narratives in a framework of the Nigerian civil war in order to explore the agency of women in healing traumatised communities.

Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* and the Complex Response of a Female Witness

Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* delineates Nigerian society and politics in the maelstrom of civil war. The novel is divided into two major parts. Part one opens with the end of British colonial rule and the transfer of political power to the elected Nigerian leaders. This part closes with scandalous corruption by the civilian leaders, which results in an army coup and the secession of Biafra under Chijioke Abosi (Biafran leader Ojukwu) from Nigeria under Saka Momoh (Nigerian leader Gowon). Part two deals with the atrocities of the civil war, the defeat of the Biafrans, and ends with Biafra’s leader Abosi’s covert escape in the middle of the night in order to protect himself and his family. Emecheta adroitly moves between urgent domestic, marital and geo-political concerns in this narrative: Alan and Debbie’s burgeoning romance, cultural imperialism, and the rampant venality of the Nigerian civilian governments. All these factors influence the portrayal and assessment of the Nigerian civil war, which is Emecheta’s principal focus. Ben Okri views the subtle

³⁶ Buchi Emecheta, ‘Buchi Emecheta’, in *Interviews with Writers of the Post-colonial World*, ed. Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock (Jackson & London: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), p. 86.

³⁷ Abioseh M. Porter, ‘They Were There, Too: Women and Civil War(s) in *Destination Biafra*’, in *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, ed. Marie Umeh (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996), p. 313.

interlacing of various themes in *Destination Biafra* as Emecheta's notable success: the book's strength 'is its attempt to weave together many important themes into one single novel, an attempt which shows a vision which is altogether missing in much of Nigerian fiction that has emerged on the subject of war.'³⁸

Destination Biafra filters the Biafran tragedy through a woman's point of view. Debbie Ogedemgbe is a young Oxford graduate with a white boyfriend, named Alan Grey. She disapproves of marriages that hold women in a subordinate position. She deplores her parents for their lavish expenditure on luxury items. She also disapproves of her parents' marriage as an unequal alliance where her mother's dignity is constantly at stake. In order to achieve financial independence and emotional fulfilment on her own terms, Debbie disassociates herself from the prescribed gender roles of a mother and wife: 'She wanted to do something more than child breeding and rearing and being a good passive wife to a man whose ego she must boost all her days, while making sure to submerge every impulse that made her a full human. Before long she would have no image at all, she would be as colourless as her poor mother.'³⁹ Debbie is presented as an iconoclast, and decides to join the army as a female Nigerian officer. However, her Oxford-degree and her gun do not save her from rapists, who are ironically fellow Nigerian soldiers.

Debbie is represented as the first female officer in the Nigerian army and fighting alongside male soldiers. Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* is an attempt to argue for the acknowledgement of women's presence at the forefront of the war as active agents alongside men. The army is presented as a signifier of patriarchal Nigerian society, and therefore Debbie's survival in it is difficult. Debbie's decision to join the army is a conscious choice on her part. However, her male colleagues doubt or belittle her intentions, since, as a woman, she cannot claim any right over the country as this is a strictly male

³⁸ Okri, 'Women in Male War', p. 727.

³⁹ Buchi Emecheta, *Destination Biafra* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1983), p. 45.

domain. Therefore her male colleagues explain her decision to join the army as a scheme to revenge her father's death. They make fun of her when they see her in a military uniform: 'One or two of the officers who had briefly contemplated fighting their way to freedom gave up the idea and took refuge in staring down at Debbie Ogedemgbe and her small group with undisguised amusement as if to say, "whatever you do, however much you are armed and in command now, you are still a woman."'”⁴⁰

Debbie has been sent on a secret mission to Biafra; tasked with persuading the Biafran leader, Abosi, to renounce secession. However she is not supposed to use her intellectual capabilities to achieve this goal, as Saka Momoh, the Nigerian leader, advises her to employ her “feminine charms to break the icy reserve”⁴¹ of Abosi. She has been further advised by Chief Odumosu not to “meddle in things bigger than you and don't forget, my dear, that you are a woman. That is why we are giving you this delicate mission.”⁴² Not only army soldiers, but also chiefs and officers reduce her to the level of a mere sexual object. They make it clear to her that if she wants to play any part in the army and in the war, it is only permitted through the exploitation of her body, as this is how the institution of army, an important symbol of patriarchy, views Debbie. On her way to Biafra on a peace mission Debbie is raped by soldiers of the Nigerian army. Debbie tries her best to convince the male soldiers that she is on their side: “I am a Nigerian soldier, not a Biafran.”⁴³ However, in response, the ‘leader waddled up to her and mimicked her voice: “I am a Nigerian soldier,”’⁴⁴ and this humiliation ends at Debbie's gang-rape. However, despite this sexual assault she continues her journey to Biafra and experiences another rape. This time, Lawal, the leader of the Nigerian troops, attempts to rape her. He calls

⁴⁰ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 79.

⁴¹ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 123.

⁴² Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 129.

⁴³ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 131.

⁴⁴ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 131.

Debbie a white man's 'plaything,'⁴⁵ and threatens that he is going to show that she is "nothing but a woman, an ordinary woman."⁴⁶ Debbie's mother, Stella Ogedemgbe, attempts to report the violation of her daughter after her first rape. However, what she receives in response is a very casual comment by a soldier: "Give her hot water to wash herself. Hundreds of women have been raped—so what? It's a war. She's lucky to be even alive."⁴⁷ Stella does not file the report: "I am telling you that my daughter has been ra—" She could not bring herself to say the word. It was too horrible, too humiliating.⁴⁸ However, this resignation by Debbie and her mother goes against Emecheta's politics of gender. The textual emphasis on rape suggests that Emecheta is striving to shape a largely uncensored account or testimony of what would otherwise be unreported or unacknowledged crimes and human rights violations.⁴⁹ According to Michael Syrotinski, 'when the events to which the narrators bear witness are as incredible as the events of the [Nigerian civil war], fiction is perhaps the most powerful (and even most appropriate) means of [...] [safeguarding] this experience from disappearing into the "calculation" of history, of truth as testimonial recounting, or enumeration of objective facts and names.'⁵⁰ Emecheta shows those segments of the war that other narratives either completely ignore or relate obliquely. As Florence Stratton has observed that Emecheta's detailed recounting of rapes of Debbie, young girls, and the nuns 'breaks through a conspiracy of silence, a silence that protects male interests.'⁵¹

⁴⁵ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 175.

⁴⁶ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 175.

⁴⁷ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 135.

⁴⁸ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 135.

⁴⁹ For the journalistic account of the Biafran war, see John A. Sambe, 'Network coverage of the civil war in Nigeria', *Journal of Broadcasting*, 24.1 (1980), pp. 61-67; and A. B. Akinyemi, 'The British Press and the Nigerian Civil War', *African Affairs*, 71.285 (1972), pp. 408-426.

⁵⁰ Michael Syrotinski, 'Monstrous Fictions: Testifying to the Rwandan Genocide in Tierno Monénembo's *L'ainé des orphelins*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 45.4 (2009), p. 437.

⁵¹ Florence Stratton, 'Room for Women', in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 123; see also Ann Marie Adams, 'It's a Woman's War: Engendering Conflict in Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*', *Callaloo*, 24.1 (2001), pp. 287-300.

Emecheta's chapter 'Women's War' reinforces her argument about women and children's sufferings. Now it is no longer 'Girls at War'⁵² but rather women at war. 'Women's War' describe in detail the various courageous ways through which women endure adversities and face several misfortunes. When Dorothy, the young mother, expresses her desire to die after finding the body of the baby Biafra, Uzoma, another abandoned and poor woman, reprimands her for giving up on life:

'Your husband must have been a very nice man. Mine gave me housekeeping money but I had to sell things to make it up. He was a big man, but I still had to do something. I was hoping to go back to teaching in few years' time. Our men were useful, yes, very useful; but they have now been killed by other men. We have children to look after. Just like our grandmothers. They looked after our parents who had us. So I don't know why Dorothy should want to die, when her days are not up yet.'⁵³

Debbie herself is surprised to see this change in Uzoma. She saw Uzoma Madako with her husband in Benin, where she talked in 'whispers', and 'lifted her eyes as if they were so weighty'; but now, 'a few days after the death of her husband, she had the courage to slap another woman, to tell another woman to stop indulging in self-pity.'⁵⁴ Emecheta's novel and this chapter particularly demonstrate women's strengths and boldness in challenging times. Debbie's choice of a profession enables her to forge meaningful and sincere friendships and alliance across classes and ethnic group, which enables her to communicate the Biafran story through her proposed novel, provisionally entitled

⁵² Achebe in his short story 'Girls at War' in *Girls at War* shows how girls like Gladys are trading in sex in order to gain essential commodities (pp. 93-199). However, in Emecheta's chapter 'Women's War' women fight the battle alongside men to save their families. Emecheta's women are not represented as sexual commodities. They are neither using their sex as a mean to survive in a war-torn community, nor are they helpless victims. Rather, they are at the forefront of the war to fight this battle (p. 206).

⁵³ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 213.

⁵⁴ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 213.

‘Destination Biafra.’⁵⁵ Thus I disagree with Jane Bryce that Debbie does not evolve and ‘remains a product of her class.’⁵⁶ After the defeat of Biafra, Abosi (Biafran leader Ojukwu) escapes abroad, and Alan asks Debbie to marry him and go to England. She rejects Alan’s proposal by declaring that she will never attach herself with a former coloniser:⁵⁷ ‘Goodbye, Alan. I didn’t mind your being my male concubine, but Africa will never again stoop to being your wife.’⁵⁸ This shows Debbie’s development as a character who has now a clear insight into the politics of war, and can lend crucial moral and physical support to shattered communities. According to Katherine Fishburn:

[i]n this spirited exchange between the former oppressor and oppressed, Debbie Ogedemgbe is clearly intended to represent a unified and finally free Nigeria. That Debbie declares independence by refusing to become Alan’s wife is significant, especially when she uses the same metaphor to declare Africa’s independence [...] and establishes the thoroughness of her own decolonisation by naming Alan Grey her ‘male concubine’, thus reversing the balance of power between them.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ See Okereke, ‘The Nigerian Civil War and the Female Imagination in Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*’, p. 155.

⁵⁶ Jane Bryce, ‘Conflict and Contradiction in Women’s Writing on the Nigerian Civil War’, *African Languages and Cultures*, 4.1 (1991), p. 40; see also Stratton, ‘Room for Women’, p. 126; see also Omar Sougou, ‘Towards Consciousness’, in *Writing Across Cultures: Gender Politics and Difference in the Fiction of Buchi Emecheta* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2002), p. 118; see also Katherine Frank, ‘Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa’, *African Literature Today*, 15 (1987), p. 27.

⁵⁷ This is also the ultimate meaning of the final scene in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924), where the phrase, ‘No, not yet’ (p. 316) declares that only when India is free will there be a basis for a relationship between Aziz and Fielding. The rocks that rise between them on their last ride together, the horses that swerve apart – they symbolise that the only hope of a future for them lies in the freedom of India from British rule: “‘Down with the English anyhow. That’s certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don’t make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it’s fifty or five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then” – he rode against him furiously – “and then,” he concluded, half kissing him, “you and I shall be friends” (p. 316). In a letter from Hyderabad at the end of his 1921 visit, E. M. Forster expressed his conviction that Indians now need more than improved English manners: ‘But it’s too late. Indians don’t long for a social intercourse with Englishmen any longer. They have made a life of their own.’ E. M. Forster, *The Hill of Devi* (New York: Brace and World, 1953), p.237. Aziz cannot have a relationship with Fielding and Debbie cannot have a relationship with Alan unless their countries secure complete freedom from their colonisers.

⁵⁸ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 259.

⁵⁹ Katherine Fishburn, ‘The Difference of View’, in *Reading Buchi Emecheta: Cross-Cultural Conversations* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), p. 132.

Debbie's first-hand experience of the war, her rapes, her ability to see and experience sufferings unencumbered by the restrictions of caste and ethnicity, have finally enabled her to apprehend what drives the brutal civil war. It is, at least in part, the colonial mentality of the rulers: "I see now that Abosi and his like are still colonized. They need to be decolonized. I am not like him, a black white man; I am a woman and a woman of Africa. [...] I shall tell [...] the story of how a few ambitious soldiers from Sandhurst tried to make their dream a reality."⁶⁰ Debbie is the new storyteller of the Biafran tragedy, and she will narrate the 'entire story of the women's experience of the war.'⁶¹ Thus, according to Omar Sougou, 'it is well into the book that we find the story, in the manner of a meta-narrative, suggesting its own creation as being Debbie's own constructed narrative, which is presented as a forbidden discourse to be concealed and codified, as she does in her manuscript, which must be hidden away in order to survive.'⁶² Ali Mazrui argues in *The African Condition: A Political Diagnosis*, that we can reduce the risks of war 'in a world of transformed sex roles.'⁶³ Debbie's experiences indicate that the transformation of gender roles cannot be initiated without changing the fundamental civic and cultural institutions of the society: family, marriage, motherhood, education and especially financial systems. Emecheta's Debbie inhabits a dramatically different role, a Nigeria army officer, but this role brings her little solace or relief.

Female friendships are also very important in Emecheta's politics of gender. Emecheta writes in her introduction to *Head Above Water*, that Debbie is her 'dream woman.'⁶⁴ Omar Sougou argues that Emecheta's idea of a dream woman would be incomplete without considering Babs alongside Debbie, as these two women complement each other, and together they represent the new African woman of Emecheta's fictional

⁶⁰ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 258.

⁶¹ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 223.

⁶² Sougou, 'Towards Consciousness', pp. 128-129.

⁶³ Ali Mazrui, 'In Search of Pax Africana', in *The African Condition: A Political Diagnosis* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1980) p. 135.

⁶⁴ Buchi Emecheta, *Head Above Water* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1994), p. 1.

vision.⁶⁵ When Debbie fails to understand the crucial role, which foreign powers are going to play in their civil war, it is Babs who comprehends the situation and encourages Debbie to look through the deceit, subterfuge and fraud: “Wake up, Debbie, my friend! Didn’t you see that picture taken at Aburi, and didn’t you see that all the faces in the background were white? Since when have we had white Nigerians? And the guns, even your rifle there – are they made in Nigeria? What about the oil – are we going to refine it here, use it here? You know the truth as well as I do; and believe me, I don’t like what I think is coming.”⁶⁶

Babs is represented as a more critical and politically savvy observer of the new situation which is unfolding in Nigeria immediately after independence. She is more astute in her observation of the looming civil war in Nigeria, and realises that the east cannot win this war on its own:

‘The East alone can’t fight the rest of the country, any fool can see that. Any fool of a woman, perhaps, but not men, least of all army men turned politician. The women and children who would be killed by bombs and guns would simply be statistics, war casualties. But for the soldier-politicians, the traders in arms, who only think of their personal gain, it would be the chance of a lifetime. And the politicians who started it all can pay their way to Europe or America and wait until it has all blown over.’⁶⁷

This shows Babs’s ability to recognise material gains and personal ambitions which have been packaged as patriotism and presented to both Nigerians and Biafrans.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Omar Sougou, ‘Towards Consciousness’, in *Writing Across Cultures: Gender Politics and Difference in the Fiction of Buchi Emecheta* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2002), p. 125.

⁶⁶ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 110.

⁶⁷ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 109.

⁶⁸ Sougou contends that Babs’s voice is the most powerful example of rejection of the war by women who are presented as more perceptive than men but are appropriated by historical and social factors of the society. See Sougou, ‘Towards Consciousness’, p. 126.

Emecheta's narrative has garnered negative reviews partly for its perceived bias or cultural oversights and exclusions. According to J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, 'Emecheta is so concerned about the treatment inflicted by both Nigerian and Biafran soldiers on her Western Igbo people during that war that she seems to have forgotten to condemn war as prominent writers through the ages have done.'⁶⁹ He adds that '[t]he women are merely raped but the men are killed. Why the author bemoans the rapes more than the deaths is not explained anywhere in *Destination Biafra*.'⁷⁰ I found this criticism of *Destination Biafra* disquieting. Nwachukwu-Agbada's take on Emecheta's novel is blinkered. The novel conveys in miniature the extremities and casual brutalities of the wider conflict. *Destination Biafra* does not give the impression that it is all about rape victims and nothing else. One reason, why Nwachukwu-Agbada finds the narrative treatment of sexual violence too prominent, is his inability to confront the full implications of rape as a war crime recorded with such unflinching rigour. Emecheta's detailed description of the scenes of Debbie's rape in the novel reflects her sensitivity to the female predicament in difficult circumstances. In her other novels, challenging socio-economic conditions lead women into a culture of prostitution and abuse, and during war times, they become the victims of a male drive to dominate through sexual violence. As a female chronicler of the war, Emecheta is in a better position to understand the physical, emotional and psychological consequences of rape to Nigerian women in general and Debbie in particular. However, *Destination Biafra* is not limited to delineating rape as psychological and physical trauma and as a war crime. Emecheta also portrays in searching detail the highly charged and fraught atmosphere fed by the mass panic, revulsions, and massacres of the civil war. As Grace Eche Okereke observes: 'The wanton killing of Ibo men on "Operation Mosquito", the gun shots, bombshells and screams of the dying, the rotten corpses along the Benin-Asaba road, the trapping of the refugee women and children in the muddy swamp [...] are all

⁶⁹ J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, 'Buchi Emecheta: Politics, War and Feminism in *Destination Biafra*', in *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, p. 391.

⁷⁰ Nwachukwu-Agbada, 'Buchi Emecheta', p. 393.

vividly and movingly described and they cumulatively create this atmosphere of war.’⁷¹ In the midst of this collective insanity, Emecheta stresses the complex response of a female witness whose insights have been largely occluded or ignored by many male cultural commentators on the Nigerian civil war.

Women’s War Narratives in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* is also about women’s war testimony. The protagonist is a woman named Olanna. She has a more politically radical sister Kainene, who disappears at the end of the novel. Amy Novak argues that female voices in *Half of a Yellow Sun* remain cut off and silenced.⁷² However, the presence of brave and bold women problematizes Novak’s view. Olanna is shown as an independent minded woman, who ‘was used to her mother’s disapproval; it had coloured most of her major decisions, after all: when she chose two weeks’ suspension rather than apologize to her Heath-grove form mistress for insisting that the lessons on Pax Britannica were contradictory; when she joined the Students’ Movement for Independence at Ibadan; when she refused to marry Igwe Okagbue’s son, and later, Chief Okaro’s son.’⁷³ When Olanna is struggling in her relationship with Odenigbo, her uneducated, but courageous aunty Ifeka helps her: “No [...] you will go back to Nsukka. [...] I am not asking you to go back to his house. I said you will go back to Nsukka. Do you not have your own flat and your own job? [...] You must never behave as if your life belongs to a man. Do you hear me? [...] Your life belongs to you and you alone.”⁷⁴

Olanna’s relationship with Odenigbo is based on equality and love till the very end of the novel. Odenigbo proposes several times to Olanna, but she refuses each time.

⁷¹ Okereke, ‘The Nigerian Civil War and the Female Imagination in Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*’, p. 153.

⁷² See Amy Novak, ‘Who Speaks? Who Listens?: The Problem of Address in Two Nigerian Trauma Novels’, *Studies in the Novel*, 40.1-2 (2008), pp. 31-51.

⁷³ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 35.

⁷⁴ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 226.

Marriage has never been Olanna's priority. However, eventually she marries him due to the tenuousness of the war time situation. Kainene, Olanna's sister, dominates her white lover, Richard Churchill. Richard is presented as a needy and insecure character, who begins to address himself as the fiancé or sometimes as the husband of Kainene.⁷⁵ Kainene, on the other hand, remains indifferent towards those tags, and does not define herself in terms of fiancée or wife. Unlike the arrogant and conceited Alan Grey in *Destination Biafra*, Richard Churchill is portrayed as a timid and nervous character, who asks Igbo houseboys to find local herbal remedies for his sexual impotency.⁷⁶ Adichie's portrayal of Richard as sexually inadequate male indicates that Britain has no part to play in the domestic politics and foreign policy of Nigeria. Kainene's refusal to acknowledge Richard either as a husband or fiancé mirrors Nigeria's capacity to survive independently of former colonial powers.⁷⁷

Adichie's Olanna and Kainene are independent women. They are the real political agents in the novel, the driving force of the narrative, now we are listening to their side of the story, their world which '[m]aster and Mr Richard could never quite enter.'⁷⁸ Olanna, on discovering Odenigbo's infidelity, recognises that the actual victim in this scenario is Amala, 'who did not have a voice,'⁷⁹ and is completely helpless: 'Odenigbo made a drunken pass and she submitted willingly and promptly: He was the master, he spoke English, he had a car. It was the way it should be.'⁸⁰ She speaks on behalf of Amala and rather than surrendering to self-pity she decides to accept and adopt Odenigbo's child.

⁷⁵ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, pp. 151, 426, 428.

⁷⁶ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 74.

⁷⁷ According to Charles Nnolim, the character of Richard as an ordinary and fallible human being shows that Africans are no longer going to be dominated by a white British male, and this departure has shown that African literature has come of age. See Charles E. Nnolim, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*', *African Literature Today*, 27 (2010), pp. 145-151.

⁷⁸ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 399.

⁷⁹ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 250.

⁸⁰ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 250.

The main narrative of *Half of a Yellow Sun* is interspersed with snippets of another narrative known as 'The Book.' Ugwu, Odenigbo's and Olanna's houseboy is the author of this book entitled *The World Was Silent When We Died*. Emecheta uses the same technique through Debbie's 'Destination Biafra', her version of the war and its devastating impact on communities within *Destination Biafra*. These liminal narratives in which women offer first-hand testimony of war are an act of writing from the margins; the margins exist beyond the zones dominated and policed by the official discourse, and enable a dissident viewpoint to be articulated largely un beholden to the vested interests of male political concerns. The testimony of female protagonists provides an archaeology of civil war; a salvaging and preserving of experiences of the elderly, the very young and vulnerable. This technique of the book within a book 'allows Adichie [and Emecheta] to relinquish [their] position as a narrative authority, in favour of a spokesperson for the voiceless – which [they] [do] not claim to be.'⁸¹ Olanna, Debbie and Ugwu are narrating their versions of the Nigerian civil war, and towards the end of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, we learn "[t]here is no such thing as greatness."⁸²

Neo-colonialism, Cultural Imperialism and Ethnic Tensions

Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* discusses in detail the politics of greed, venality and ethnic tension which lead Nigeria to its violent conflict. The narrator tells that Igbos living in the Hausa dominated north are 'hacked', 'clubbed', and 'battered to death';⁸³ they are hunted out of their homes in 'witch hunts';⁸⁴ and their women are raped and cut into pieces.⁸⁵ Those who survive and make it back to their home in the Igbo dominated east are with terrible wounds: 'Nearly all the women are without one breast. The very old ones had only one eye each. Some of the men had been castrated, some had only one arm, others had one

⁸¹ Jane Bryce, "'Half and Half Children': Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel", *Research in African Literatures*, 39.2 (2008), p. 62.

⁸² Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 399.

⁸³ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 87.

⁸⁴ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 88.

⁸⁵ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 89.

foot amputated. All were in shocked daze, their eyes staring as if from skulls of the long dead and buried.’⁸⁶ We witness further madness when Olanna in the train on her way back from the north saw inside a calabash ‘a little girl’s head with the ash-grey skin and the plaited hair and rolled back eyes and open mouth.’⁸⁷ During an air raid we see the running body of Kainene’s servant Ikejide without his head: ‘The body was running, arched slightly forwards, arms flying around, but there was no head. There was only a bloodied neck.’⁸⁸ This bodily mutilation grotesquely symbolises the violence that is being done to the nation-state as it collapses into disunity – losing its head and its sanity. Achebe’s short story ‘The Madman’ extends this whole discourse of madness and mayhem in Nigerian politics.⁸⁹ Emecheta and Adichie both expose this ‘state of insanity’ in their work, where soldiers are shown to be as corrupt as politicians. Nigeria’s self-created turbulence and paranoia is further exaggerated by former colonial powers’ eagerness to seize Nigeria’s oil resources.

Emecheta emphasises in *Destination Biafra* that neo-colonialism and imperialism also play their part in Nigerian civil war. For the British imperialists, Nigerian independence provides them with a means to exploit Nigeria’s crude oil resources, while avoiding any responsibility for maintaining peace and stability of the country. In *Destination Biafra*, the last British Governor General, MacDonald, explains that all ‘independence will give them is the right to govern themselves. That has nothing to do with whom they trade with.’⁹⁰ This suggests that Nigeria will stay as a colony even after the declaration of independence, as Alan explains: “‘These vast areas are full of oil, pure

⁸⁶ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 90.

⁸⁷ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 149.

⁸⁸ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 317.

⁸⁹ See Chinua Achebe, ‘The Madman’, in *Girls at War* (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 1-8; Iniobong I. Uko contends that the symbolism in ‘The Madman’ operates as coded commentary on the deranged course of the Nigerian civil war. According to Uko, the actual madman in Achebe’s ‘The Madman’ represents Nigeria. The insanity manifests itself in the way Nigeria was enmeshed in ‘excessive corruption’, ‘nepotism’, and ‘a thirst for power.’ Uko describes all these events as ‘a symbolic state of insanity.’ See Iniobong I. Uko, ‘Of War & Madness: A Symbolic Transmutation of the Nigeria-Biafra War in Selected Stories from *The Insider: Stories of War and Peace from Nigeria*’, *African Literature Today*, 26 (2008), p. 51.

⁹⁰ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 7.

crude oil [...] Now we are to hand it over to these people, who've had all these minerals since Adam and not known what to do with them. Now they are beginning to be aware of their monetary value. And after Independence they may sign it all over to the Soviets for all we know.'"⁹¹ Therefore it is important for the British government that the first post-independence government in Nigeria be sympathetic towards their economic and political interests. Deep-rooted ethnic divisions in Nigeria allow the British government to achieve this goal. As Joya Uraizee argues that 'the boundaries enclosing and dividing Nigeria seem quite arbitrary, being dictated more by Western economic interests than a sense of identity among the people within it.'⁹² According to Wole Soyinka, '[m]uch of the division of Africa owed more to a case of brandy and a box of cigars than to any intrinsic claims about what the boundaries enclose.'⁹³ As Debbie realises, 'Nigeria was only one nation as a result of administrative balkanization'⁹⁴ by the British and French powers.'⁹⁵ MacDonald and his counsellors exploit these ethnicities through their decision to use 'proportional representation'⁹⁶ as the voting principle. This guarantees Hausa victory in Nigeria's first election after independence. For the British government, the Hausa – the largest ethnic group in Nigeria are "'ignorant and happy in their ignorance,'"⁹⁷ and therefore useful as a puppet government to be exploited and manipulated by the British government. All these

⁹¹ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 6.

⁹² Joya Uraizee, 'Divided Lands and Stagnant Minds: Worlds in Conflict in *July's People*, *Storm in Chandigarh*, and *Destination Biafra*', in *There is No Place for a Woman: Nadine Gordimer, Nayantra Sahgal, Buchi Emecheta and the Politics of Gender* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000), pp. 215-216.

⁹³ Wole Soyinka, 'Memory, Truth and Healing', in *The Politics of Memory: Truth, Healing and Social Justice*, ed. Ifi Amadiume and Abdullahi An-Na'im (London & New York: Zed Books, 2000), p. 27.

⁹⁴ Balkanization is defined as a division of a multinational state into smaller ethnically homogenous entities. The term also is used to refer to ethnic conflict within multiethnic states. It was coined at the end of World War I to describe the ethnic and political fragmentation that followed the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, particularly in the Balkans. (The term Balkanization is today invoked to explain the disintegration of some multiethnic states and their devolution into dictatorship, ethnic cleansing, and civil war.)

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/50323/Balkanization> [accessed 14th Nov. 2011]. In January 2007, regarding a rise in support for Scottish independence, Gordon Brown talked of a 'Balkanisation of Britain', <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1539367/We-need-a-United-Kingdom.html> [accessed 14th Nov. 2011].

⁹⁵ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 175.

⁹⁶ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 8.

⁹⁷ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 6.

cunning schemes result in success, and Mallam Nguru Kano, a Hausa politician, becomes the first Prime Minister of an independent Nigeria.

Mallam Nguru Kano is described as a man of ‘Arabic feudalistic majesty’,⁹⁸ who frowns upon MacDonald when he asks him when he will allow women in the north to cast their votes.⁹⁹ This technical rigging in Nigeria’s first election gives an over-whelming majority to the Hausa, which results in severe turmoil, as each ethnicity wishes to become the major share-holder in the newly elected civilian government. The civil unrest which begins with the first election eventually ends in conflict. As the war progresses, Alan Grey, who is represented as a British neo-imperialist, acknowledges the Biafran cause while secretly negotiating with the Nigerian government for oil in exchange for munitions. During the war, he sells arms to Momoh, and simultaneously provides humanitarian aid to Abosi to ensure the impartiality of the neo-imperialists. The British neo-imperialism fuels this war due to their interest in the eastern oil reserves, and as a result the agonies of the Biafran and Nigerian civilians are prolonged. As Juliet Okonkwo suggests, ‘both sides were manipulated like puppets in a struggle whose ultimate motivations, conduct and outcome depended almost entirely on external powers and their material interests.’¹⁰⁰

Emecheta and Adichie also provide incisive accounts of cultural imperialism in their work. Richard in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and Alan in *Destination Biafra* are more preoccupied with collecting art work in Nigeria at a time of civil strife. Alan Grey travels to the mid-west region to collect the ‘bronzes’, ‘carved elephant tusks’ and ‘moulded animal figures’ which ‘[w]estern culture had dubbed with the name of “primitive art.”’¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 5.

⁹⁹ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ Juliet Okonkwo, ‘Biafran War Novels – A Review’, *NSAL: Nsukka Studies in African Literature*, 4 (1986), p. 162.

¹⁰¹ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 4.

African art had greatly influenced the shaping of the modern culture.¹⁰² According to Simon Gikandi ‘the appropriation and translation’ of African art objects ‘was surrounded by an ambivalence. [...] The source of this ambivalence is that the modernist’s desire for African art objects, or even for an African, pre-modern mentality, was always blocked and often haunted by the apparitional and haunting presence of the African’s body.’¹⁰³ Gikandi contends that ‘what was unique in modernism, and what was unprecedented in the European encounter with the other, was the separation of the savages’ bodies – and their beliefs and practices – from their aesthetic objects.’¹⁰⁴ Both Alan and Richard epitomise revealing case studies of this tendency. They are interested in Igbo-Ukwu art by Nigerians, but also make reductive comments on Nigerians because of their ethnic background.¹⁰⁵ This cultural imperialism and colonisation of independent states in present-day Nigeria becomes all the more striking when we consider their prior culture and history.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² See Robert John Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1986); Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage, Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Gina M. Rossetti, *Imagining the Primitive in Naturalist and Modernist Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006).

¹⁰³ Simon Gikandi, ‘Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism’, in *Geomodernism: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 40.

¹⁰⁴ Gikandi, ‘Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism’, pp. 41-42.

¹⁰⁵ Alan Grey’s relationship with Debbie in Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* is more of an equal partnership but towards the end Debbie refuses to marry him for her country. Reacting to her refusal Alan makes a racist comment: ‘That was the trouble with these blacks. Give them some education and they quoted it all back at you, as if the education was made for them in the first place’ (p. 259). And in Richard’s final appearance in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the barely suppressed racist attitude towards Kainene’s friend Major Madu comes to the surface: ‘Come back, he wanted to say, come back here and tell me if you ever laid your filthy black hand on her’ (p. 30). Both Alan and Richard are in Nigeria because they share a fondness for Igbo-Ukwu art. Their presence functions as a marker for how ‘colonial epistemology constructs and shapes Africa as an object for consumption. Their presence illustrates the continuing legacy and belief of superiority in the western subject’s relationship with African people’ till Debbie refuses Alan and Kainene meets Richard and reverses the power relationship. See Amy Novak, ‘Who Speaks? Who Listens?: The Problem of Address in Two Nigerian Trauma Novels’, *Studies in the Novel*, 40.1-2 (2008), p. 40.

¹⁰⁶ For more about the culture and history of pre-colonial Nigeria see M. H. Hansen, *Polis and City-State: An Ancient Concept and Its Modern Equivalent* (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 1998); J. D. Y. Peel, ‘Yoruba as a City-State Culture’, in *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Culture: An Investigation Conducted by the Copenhagen Polis Centre*, ed. Mogens Herman Hansen (Copenhagen: Reitzels, 2000), pp. 507-517; Robert Griffith ‘The Hausa City-States from 1450 to 1804’, in *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Culture*, pp. 483-506; Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, ‘Early States and Societies, 9000 BCE –1500 CE’, in *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.16-38; Akinwumi Ogundiran, ed. *Precolonial Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Toyin Falola* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005); and April A. Gordon, ‘The Peopling of Nigeria’ and ‘Cultures of Nigeria: An Overview of Ethnicity, Region and Religion’, in *Nigeria’s Diverse People: A Reference Source Book* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC –CLO: 2003), pp. 1-19 and pp. 21-41.

Patriotism, Freedom and Corrupt Plutocracy

Emecheta criticises the idea of a war of freedom where poor men have been forced to fight in the war, while the sons of the rich escape: ‘Luckily, the two women’s sons listened to their mothers, and left Biafra along with the list of goods and bags of Biafran money. They wrote to their fathers soon afterwards to say that they are safe, and Dr. Eze and Dr. Ozimba both shook their heads and remarked, “[t]hese women, what they can do.”’¹⁰⁷ But while their sons are safe, the ‘ordinary Ibo family had to send their sons to the front to fight the war of liberation, their children and old people still died of malnutrition.’¹⁰⁸ Emecheta’s novel suggests that the war, where patriotism and freedom have been sold as commodities for the benefit of a corrupt plutocracy, and where only poor sections of the society are suffering, is immoral. Therefore, ‘most of the young men inside Biafra had stopped volunteering. Some even poured ash on their heads to make themselves look old.’¹⁰⁹ The women’s narratives of the war in *Destination Biafra* expose the financial exploitation of the war carried out by the Biafran as well as Nigerian leaders. It is important to note that women’s narratives lack any glorification of victory, freedom or patriotism. Emecheta is criticising the ‘superficial trappings of independence’¹¹⁰ which has been used to rob people of their common-sense, and eventually results in a bigger disaster and claims millions of lives. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi suggests that in *Destination Biafra*, the ‘women’s war contrasts with the violent male war raging in the background. Her [Emecheta’s] story extends to ordinary people, rural and analphabetic women whose potential for leadership men always ignore to their loss.’¹¹¹ In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna’s sympathy also crosses lines of ethnicity and class. Olanna’s new friends are ‘barely educated’¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 228.

¹⁰⁸ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 228.

¹⁰⁹ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 229.

¹¹⁰ Su Fang Ng, ‘Women’s Utopic Impulses in Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*’, in *Postcolonial Perspectives on Women Writer from Africa, the Caribbean and the US*, ed. Martin Japtok (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), p. 295.

¹¹¹ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, ‘Buchi Emecheta: The Been-To (Bintu) Novel’, in *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) p. 265.

¹¹² Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 265.

neighbours with whom ‘she has nothing in common.’¹¹³ She shows her compassion towards them by opening a school to ‘make sure that when the war is over’ the region’s children ‘will all fit back easily into regular school.’¹¹⁴ During those troubled years of war, it is Olanna who still remains strong and struggles to survive while her revolutionary husband remains passive most of the time with ‘bleary, weary eyes.’¹¹⁵ During an air-raid when she was in the bunker, ‘[i]t was the very sense of being inconsequential that pushed her from extreme fear to extreme fury. She had to matter. She could no longer exist limply, waiting to die.’¹¹⁶ And it was the same sentiment which forced Kainene to cross the enemy lines to secure food for her relief camp, and then she disappears from the narrative action. The war narratives of Emecheta and Adichie are centred on ordinary people and their sufferings: Debbie’s group of abandoned women and children; Kainene’s and Olanna’s efforts for the welfare and safety of wounded women and children in their refugee camp; and Ugwu’s forced conscription in the Biafran army, his enormous guilt as a result of his act of rape, and his experiences with child soldiers.

Emecheta and Adichie are sceptical of patriotism which played a significant part in the Nigerian civil war. The material interests of Britain play an important part in the fuelling of the war, however, the Nigerian and Biafran leaders of the time fully exploit the slogans of freedom and patriotisms with the intentions of making material profits for themselves. Therefore Debbie, Babs, Olanna, and Kainene are very sceptical of patriotism. Kate, the Biafran narrator of Flora Nwapa’s novella *Never Again*, is also disappointed with the Biafran government’s hypocrisy, insensitivity and exploitation of patriotic sloganeering. Kate’s family friend Kal believes that Kate should be in jail for not showing her support for Biafra, and criticising the Biafran politicians:

¹¹³ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 265.

¹¹⁴ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 291.

¹¹⁵ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 380.

¹¹⁶ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 280.

To our disappointment, it was Kal who had called the meeting. There were a few men and women there as well. They were the old politicians. I did not like them. To my way of thinking they caused the war. And they were now in the forefront again directing the war. The women especially were very active, more active than the men in fact. They made uniforms for the soldiers, they cooked for the soldiers and gave expensive presents to the officers. And they organized the women who prayed every Wednesday for Biafra. In return for these services, they were rewarded with special war reports exclusive to them and them alone.¹¹⁷

Never Again discloses the propaganda, lies, and deceits which both Nigerians and Biafrans exploit during the civil war for personal and political gains. The female leader of Kate's village is one of those people. She declares that she has lost her husband in the war, while in reality her husband dies of diabetes. Her encouragements and incitements to the people of the village Ugwutu are an example of patriotism which is only mouth-deep: “‘Why am I a woman? God, you should have made me a man. I would have said to the young men, to the youths whose blood I know is boiling now in their veins, follow me. I will lead you. I will fight the vandals.’”¹¹⁸

However, when the Nigerian soldiers attack the village, she is the first one to run rather than facing and fighting them.

Kate, like Babs in *Destination Biafra*, refuses to get persuaded by any sort of propagandist sentiment from the Biafran government. According to Kate, ‘Biafra could not win a civil war by mere words’ of political propaganda.¹¹⁹ Kate is not represented as a silent victim of the war. Rather, she is a politically aware commentator who is resolved to ensure her family's survival: ‘I was determined not to see my children suffer. I would sell

¹¹⁷ Flora Nwapa, *Never Again* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), p. 7.

¹¹⁸ Nwapa, *Never Again*, p. 9.

¹¹⁹ Nwapa, *Never Again*, p. 23.

all I had to feed them if I had to. They were not going to be hungry. They would not suffer from Kwashiorkor.’¹²⁰

Nwapa suggests the insanity and mayhem of the war through deaf-and-dumb Ezekoro, who miraculously regains his power of speech during the war and ‘talked and talked and talked.’¹²¹ While rumours of a Biafran victory swirl around communities, Ezekoro foolishly returns to the besieged Ugwuta in order to defend it, and is killed.¹²² *Never Again* emphasises that the adoration of war is indeed ‘never a gain’ to use Obododimma Oha’s expression.¹²³ However, during this period of despondency and tribulation, Kate’s voice is the only voice of calm rationality and optimism: ‘They would rebuild. [...] they would pick up again from the ruins of war.’¹²⁴ Kate’s ability to hope, her tenacity, and her political awareness enable her to see through both Nigerian and Biafran propaganda, and therefore to make crucial decisions for the safety of her family at crisis points during the war.

The Role of Generational Distance in the Portrayal of the Biafran Tragedy

Writing in September 1979 Eddie Iroh remarked, ‘we express sentiments now because we remember it so closely, but I believe the greater work about the war is yet to come – an unbiased, total assessment of the whole tragedy – and it will be necessary.’¹²⁵ Adichie observes a measure of emotional distance from the trauma of war but this does not suggest by any means chilly detachment or indifference on her part. Emecheta did not experience the civil war herself as she had left Nigeria in 1962 to be with her husband in England.

¹²⁰ Nwapa, *Never Again*, p. 25.

¹²¹ Nwapa, *Never Again*, p. 62.

¹²² Theodoara Akachi Ezeigbo argues that Nwapa, through Ezekoro, is suggesting that ‘war is like a corrosive which destroys people’s minds, driving the victims to a state of extreme anxiety or self-destruction.’ See Theodoara Akachi Ezeigbo, ‘Vision and Revision: Flora Nwapa and the Fiction of War’, in *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, ed. Marie Umeh (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998), p. 490.

¹²³ See Obododimma Oha, ‘Never a Gain? A Critical Reading of Flora Nwapa’s *Never Again*’, in *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa*, pp. 429-440.

¹²⁴ Nwapa, *Never Again*, p. 85.

¹²⁵ Eddie Iroh cited in Willfried F. Feuser, ‘Anomy and Beyond: Nigeria’s Civil War in Literature’, *Presence Africaine: Revue Culturelle du Monde Noir/ Cultural Review of the Negro World*, 137-138 (1986), p. 150.

However, she remembers the war due to the wide western media coverage, and the loss of many relatives and friends to whom she also dedicated *Destination Biafra*. War wounds are fresh in her memory and *Destination Biafra* dwells on the horrors in detail. However, Adichie is a writer who has inherited the traumas of the Biafran war, and maintained a critical distance in her creative remembering of this tragedy. Therefore ‘the world imagined by *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a smaller one, of incremental retreat, minute daily adaptations and personal accommodations that, taken together, tell a story of collective hardships and sufferings.’¹²⁶ This also explains why Adichie’s work does not linger on the rape of the bar girl. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Ugwu, the houseboy, commits the crime of rape when he is kidnapped in order to get recruited into the Biafran army. He and his comrades force themselves into a saloon, get drunk, and gang rape the bar girl. Ugwu initially wants to flee, but he is forced to participate in this war crime by his fellow Biafran soldiers: ““Target Destroyer, Aren’t you a man? *I bukwa nwoke?*””¹²⁷ Ugwu ‘pulled his trousers down, surprised at the swiftness of his erection,’¹²⁸ and eventually achieves ‘a self-loathing release.’¹²⁹ Unlike Emecheta, who emphasises the traumatic experience of rape victims, Adichie does not primarily focus on the abused young girl in the bar who ‘stared back at Ugwu with a calm hate.’¹³⁰ Rather, her stress falls more on Ugwu, and how his criminal act affects the rest of his life. He writes in order to suppress his nightmares: ‘The more he wrote the less he dreamed.’¹³¹ The memory of his rape with the resultant shame is a source of constant torment: ‘He wondered what Kainene would say, what she would do to him, feel about him, if she ever knew about the girl in the bar. She would loathe him. So would Olanna. So would Eberechi.’¹³² John C. Hawley argues that for Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun* ‘the war is a vortex that threatens to pull her characters to

¹²⁶ Bryce, ““Half and Half Children””, p. 61.

¹²⁷ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 365.

¹²⁸ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 365.

¹²⁹ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 365.

¹³⁰ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 365.

¹³¹ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 398.

¹³² Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, pp. 398-399.

pieces [...] [she] is getting at the spirit of the Nigerian people, recreating that spirit in the specific lives of compelling characters, but at the same time refusing to be overtaken by the events of the war.’¹³³ Adichie’s focus on the rapist and his ability to author an account of the war, and not on the rape victim, reflects her disinclination to be overwhelmed by the crimes of the war. If she does not dwell on the violated bar girl, she also does not linger on the rape horror experienced by Ugwu’s sister. This emotional and generational distance has enabled her to develop a critical novelistic articulation, which translates the memory of her parents’ generation into fiction for her generation.

Marianne Hirsch in her article ‘The Generation of Postmemory’ describes the relationship of the second generation to the traumatic experience which preceded their birth.¹³⁴ According to Hirsch, these traumatic ‘experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.’¹³⁵ She further argues that ‘[p]ostmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.’¹³⁶ Adichie is the generation of postmemory; she reconstitutes the traumatic memories of the Nigerian civil war through imaginative structures and characters. Adichie’s postmemorial work strives to ‘*reactivate* and *re-embody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. Thus less directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory, which can thus persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone.’¹³⁷ In this way she transforms memory of a brutal civil war, of which she herself had no first-hand experience, but which structured her parents’ lives, into decisive action and resistance. Adichie’s war narratives offer a different political

¹³³ John C. Hawley, ‘Biafra as Heritage and Symbol: Adichie, Mbachu, and Iweala’, *Research in African Literatures*, 39.2 (2008), p. 23.

¹³⁴ See Marianne Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (2008), pp. 103-128.

¹³⁵ Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, pp. 106-107.

¹³⁶ Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, p. 107.

¹³⁷ Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, p. 111.

expression, one of forgiving but not forgetting, holding to the belief that imaginative structures and characters can help heal the memory of Biafra.

The Desire for National Unity and Civil War

The history of civil wars is surrounded by silences in order to enforce amnesia, understandable in a context where families and communities are deeply divided by a conflict that is conducted on their doorstep. This deliberate effort to forget the past atrocities creates the split of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and in civil wars this split is distressingly evident. Abraham Lincoln concluded his Second Inaugural Address (1865) by transforming the split of ‘us and them’ into the ‘we’ of the union: ‘let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan.’¹³⁸ Adichie, and Emecheta variously seek to suture the split between ‘us and them’, and to achieve this, the uncomfortable silence needs to be broken. As Kate McLoughlin argues, ‘[w]ords do not bring about peace but, properly used, might make the old lies less credible, occasionally at least.’¹³⁹ In Nelson Mandela’s 10 May 1994 inaugural speech as president he said, ‘[t]he time for healing of the wounds has come. The moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has come. The time to build is upon us.’¹⁴⁰ Mandela is arguing that the brutal realities of the apartheid era must be faced through public accounting of the cruelties, crimes and discriminations. Here the confession of crime and guilt is essential for reconciliation.

However, for Biafran civilians, there are no war crime tribunal and court records. According to Ifi Amadium, Biafrans have ‘a different truth of creative imagination in oral history and literature, which mostly are where the war experiences are being revisited and recorded. [...] Their own truth commission is a situational one, lived in process, and as

¹³⁸ Abraham Lincoln, ‘Second Inaugural Address: March 4, 1865’, in *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. N. Baym, et al, 2nd edn., vol.1 (New York: Norton, 1985), p. 1466.

¹³⁹ Kate McLoughlin, ‘War and Words’, in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, ed. Kate McLoughlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 21.

¹⁴⁰ Martin Meredith, *Nelson Mandela: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), p. 521.

such, although there is no political closure, individuals have been achieving closure by themselves.’¹⁴¹ These war narratives by women writers can be seen as a process of achieving closure. *Destination Biafra* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* have articulated the pains of the Nigerian civil war. Clinical evidence suggests that articulation of pain is the necessary prerequisite of its alleviation.¹⁴² Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist, who works with Vietnam veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, contends that psychological recovery from such trauma is based upon the composition of a personal narrative of incidents that receive compassionate hearing.¹⁴³ Since Nigeria has not dealt with its civil war as one collective nation, it is inevitable that Emecheta’s and Adichie’s war narratives cannot readily receive a sympathetic hearing from everyone in Nigeria, but at least they started the process of confronting and talking about the bitter experiences of civil war. In a reply to a question about whether the people of Nigeria are still grieving and processing this war, Adichie replied:

A lot of people haven’t dealt with it at all, in part because we haven’t dealt with it as a collective nation. Nobody learns about Igbo culture in high school. You’re told that a war happened and nothing else. Igbo people have a sense that we’re supposed to pretend nothing happened [...] when I told people I was writing about the war, they thought I was crazy. They’d say, ‘You are just looking for trouble, you are encouraging violence.’ I still get a few angry emails from people who feel I should not have written about that war. But then I do get pleasantly surprised by many people whose parents had been through the war and never said anything to their kids. Sometimes I get stupidly emotional. I did a reading in Nigeria, and a woman

¹⁴¹ Ifi Amadium ‘The Politics of Memory: Biafra and Intellectual Responsibility’, in *The Memory of Politics*, p. 54.

¹⁴² See Elaine Scarry, ‘Introduction’, in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 9; and Jean Seaton, ‘Painful News’, in *Carnage and the Media: The Making and Breaking of News About Violence* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), p. 124.

¹⁴³ See Jonathan Shay, ‘Betrayal of “What’s Right”’ and ‘Healing and Tragedy’, in *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (London & New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1994), pp. 4-5, pp.188-192.

came up to me and said, ‘Because of your book, I can finally talk about what happened to me, and I thank you.’ And then I start crying. [laughs]¹⁴⁴

This demonstrates that Adichie is tackling issues of public fear, ideological conditioning, and lingering ethnic animosities in her work. Adichie’s text stresses the need for Nigerians to confront the Nigerian civil war as a dark chapter of their history.

Sarah Cole argues that ‘national unity may be a pure fiction, but when it is violently disrupted, as in civil war, it becomes an abiding ideal towards which the imagination constantly reaches.’¹⁴⁵ In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, when Kainene disappears Olanna consults dibia and performs the advised action which results in nothing. Odenigbo criticises her: “‘That *dibia* was just hungry for goat meat. You can’t believe in that,’”¹⁴⁶ to which she retaliates: “‘I do believe in it. I believe in everything. I believe in anything that will bring my sister home.’”¹⁴⁷ Kainene’s sudden and unexplained disappearance at the end of the novel can be read as a direct reference to the position and significance of Biafra in Nigerian history and culture. The ghost of Biafra demands Nigerians encounter and question past conflicts and crimes which can help them overcome their historical amnesia, and move forward as one nation. Olanna’s obsessive search for her sister suggests the desire to regain the pugnaciously ruptured national unity of Nigeria. This indefatigable search for once violated national unity also defines Debbie at the end of *Destination Biafra* as a ‘daughter of Nigeria,’¹⁴⁸ rather than as Itsekiri which is her ethnic identity. Emecheta says in her foreword to *Destination Biafra*, that “‘Debbie Ogedemgbe” [...] is neither Ibo nor Yoruba nor Hausa, but simply a Nigerian.”¹⁴⁹ This also reflects Emecheta’s hope and optimism for Nigeria without rigid ethnic divides. Their narratives foreground the need to

¹⁴⁴ Kera Bolonik, ‘Memory, Witness, and War: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Talks with Bookforum’, *Bookforum*, 14.4, December 2007-January 2008, http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/014_04/1403 [accessed 21st April 2012].

¹⁴⁵ Sarah Cole, ‘People in War’, in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁶ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 433.

¹⁴⁷ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 433.

¹⁴⁸ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. 258.

¹⁴⁹ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, p. viii.

confront and process those historical factors which caused the deaths of almost two million Igbos. Algerian born French critic Hélène Cixous discussed her troubled relationship with her country of birth because of violence, hatred, war, and colonialism.¹⁵⁰ Cixous remarked in her essay that she left Algeria with the certainty that she would never return again. But then Algeria returned to her through ‘Algeriance’, which is ‘something stronger than wars, repression, forgetting, resentment, the centuries of misunderstanding, something gentler, more ancient, more immediate, more fleshy, more free, a force independent of all struggle that laughs at championshipings, claims and reproaches.’¹⁵¹ This Algeriance, according to Cixous, came with ‘women’s arms,’ and she is hoping that ‘for the past we have the future without violence of which we dream together.’¹⁵² In a similar way Emecheta and Adichie reinforce the necessity for new narratives of healing, hope and recovery.

¹⁵⁰ See Hélène Cixous, ‘My Algeriance, in Other Words: To Depart Not to Arrive from Algeria’, in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 153-172.

¹⁵¹ Cixous, ‘My Algeriance, in Other Words’, p. 172.

¹⁵² Cixous, ‘My Algeriance, in Other Words’, p. 172.

‘I’m Not One of Them But I’m Not One of You’:¹ Colonial Education and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Women

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names [...] in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland.²

I had been reading all the English classics, and you know how they give you a real sense of the time, of the passing of time and it just seemed to me that, well, there were people living in Zimbabwe or Rhodesia, and nobody knew about them, and if nobody set it down, then nobody would know about them. And I think that this need was also very strong for me because I didn’t have a grandmother or a person in my family who was a historian who could tell me about the recent past.³

The Politics of Colonial Education in Rhodesia

Thomas M. Franck, in *Race and Nationalism: The Struggle for Power in Rhodesia-Nyasaland* (1960), observes that ‘[i]f one issue could be closer to the hearts of Africans than any other – closer than either prosperity or liberty – it is education. [...] The European colonisers have diligently taught that education is the indispensable prerequisite to economic progress and political privilege. The African has come, wholeheartedly, to believe it.’⁴ According to R. J. Zvobgo, imperial strategists exploited this demand to their advantage and stripped it of its revolutionary or transgressive potential. Building a large-scale economy and co-opting the African social elite could secure the interests of the empire.⁵ For Zvobgo, a European style of education offered to the African elite would satisfy African political ambitions for their economic and social advancement while simultaneously contributing to the establishment of a cultural and ideological identity in common with the imperial power, which could be exploited and manipulated whenever the

¹ Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (Oxfordshire: Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2004), p. 205.

² Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, ‘Introduction’, in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), p. 3.

³ Rosemary Marangoly George, Helen Scot, and Tsitsi Dangarembga, ‘An Interview with Tsitsi Dangarembga’, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 26.3 (1993), pp. 311-312.

⁴ Thomas M. Franck, ‘Partnership in Education’, in *Race and Nationalism: The Struggle for Power in Rhodesia - Nyasaland* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1960), p. 116.

⁵ See R. J. Zvobgo, ‘Industrialisation and Conflicting Interests: Implications for Education Policy 1934-52’, in *Colonialism and Education in Zimbabwe* (Harare: Sapes Books, 1994), pp. 36-37.

need should arise. In order to achieve these goals, education was cautiously controlled and deployed ‘to pattern the character of the African, to fashion his lifestyle on the basis of western culture and reshape his behaviour and needs to suit those of a huge and complicated industrial capitalist system. Once he had become part of the white system he would easily obey white laws and observe social obligations while abandoning the ancient tribal sanctions, rules of conduct and economic system.’⁶ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argues that this system of colonial education initiates the cultural alienation, which further causes the divide within the self:

Colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one’s environment. It starts with a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualization, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in home and in the community. It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies.⁷

This decapitating violence of colonial education, according to Ngũgĩ, causes psychic disintegration and stupefaction on an individual and collective scale. This divide within the self is evident in Samba Diallo, the protagonist in Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s novel *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962). As Kane puts it in the novel, ‘[o]n the black continent it began to be understood that their true power lay not in the cannons of the first morning, but rather in what followed the cannons.’⁸ In Kane’s novel, the ‘ambiguous adventure’ of colonial education is illustrated when the Chief of the Diallobé speaks to a teacher regarding the children of his tribe: “If I told them to go to the new school [...] they would

⁶ Zvobgo, ‘Industrialisation and Conflicting Interests’, p. 39.

⁷ Ngũgĩ, ‘The Language of African Literature’, p. 28.

⁸ Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, trans. Katherine Woods (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 49.

go *en masse*. They would learn all the ways of joining wood to wood which we do not know. But, learning, they would also forget. Would what they would learn be worth as much as what they would forget? I should like to ask you: can one learn *this* without forgetting *that*, and is what one learns worth what one forgets?”⁹ This is a problem which Samba Diallo himself attempts to answer in a conversation with his friend Adele in Paris: ““I loved them too soon, without knowing them well enough. [...] No one should ally himself with them without having observed them well before-hand.” “Yes. But they do not leave time for that to the people whom they conquer.” “Then the people they conquer ought to remain on guard.””¹⁰ Samba Diallo remembers how he had interrupted his studies with the teacher of the Diallobé, ““at the very moment when he was about to initiate me at last into the rational understanding of what up to then I had done no more than recite – with wonder to be sure.””¹¹ In other words, he is exposed to the stronger power of the colonisers when he was too young to understand them. Samba Diallo remarks to his host in Paris: ““I have chosen the itinerary which is most likely to get me lost.””¹² He further explains that ““they interposed themselves, and undertook to transform me in their image. Progressively, they brought me out from the heart of things, and accustomed me to live at a distance from the world.””¹³ Abiola Irele proposes that the African student educated in European languages is ‘wedged uncomfortably between the values of our traditional culture and those of the West.’¹⁴ He goes on to say that the structuring motif of alienation which imbues several African novels ‘is the feeling that it is within our traditional culture that we are happiest, most at ease with ourselves.’¹⁵ This explains Samba Diallo’s unease in Paris, away from his traditional world. However, Dangarembga’s work complicates Irele’s argument. Tambu in *Nervous Conditions* experiences traditional culture as a heavy

⁹ Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, p. 34.

¹⁰ Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, pp. 158-59.

¹¹ Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, pp. 159-60.

¹² Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, p. 113.

¹³ Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, p. 160.

¹⁴ Abiola Irele, ‘In Praise of Alienation’, in *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness*, ed. V.Y. Mudimbe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 212-213.

¹⁵ Irele, ‘In Praise of Alienation’, p. 204.

burden and an intensely limited and stifling existence, where she cannot feel ‘most at ease.’¹⁶ Tambu’s meagre existence enables her to accept unashamedly the death of her brother as her chance to leave the world of poverty and lack of basic amenities: ‘[A] step away from the flies, the smells, the fields and the rags; from stomachs which were seldom full, from dirt and disease.’¹⁷ Thus Tambu also complicates Ngũgĩ’s polemical stance that colonial education is the only cause of cultural alienation.

Missions controlled the education system during the colonial period. To young girls and women they offered a limited freedom from the constraints of indigenous traditions.¹⁸ According to Diana Jeater, mission records reveal many cases of women running away from arranged marriages or the practice of child pledging called Kudzaira. The prospect of being forced into an unwanted marriage provoked many African girls to seek refuge in the missions. The missionaries willingly accepted them in the name of ‘civilising’ and emancipating African women, and also encouraged the girls to rebel against the confining practices of their indigenous culture.¹⁹ D. G. H. Flood states that the LMS girls’ school at Nenguwo was started in 1916, when ‘two girls sought refuge with the mission from distasteful marriages arranged by their fathers with elderly polygynists.’²⁰ Sybille Kuster argues that due to the structural inequalities in African society, the association with a church body and the acquisition of mission education provided a viable

¹⁶ According to Ann Elizabeth Willey, because Tambu is a female she experiences alienation in a fundamentally different way to Irele’s implicitly male subject in his essay. See Ann Elizabeth Willey, ‘Modernity, Alienation, and Development: *Nervous Conditions* and the Female Paradigm’, in *Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga: Negotiating the Postcolonial*, ed. Ann Elizabeth Willey and Jeanette Treiber (Trenton, NJ: Africa World press, 2002), p. 69.

¹⁷ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 186.

¹⁸ See Alison Searle, ‘The Role of Missions in *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Conditions*’, *Literature and Theology*, 21.1 (2007), pp. 49-65.

¹⁹ See Diana Jeater, *Marriage, Perversion and Power: The Construction of Moral Discourse in Southern Rhodesia 1894-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

²⁰ D. G. H Flood, ‘The Contribution of the London Missionary Society to African Education in Ndebeleland 1859-1959’, in *Christianity South of Zambezi*, vol. 1, ed. Anthony J. Dachs (Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1973), pp. 103-104.

escape route for African women.²¹ However, according to Kuster, the mission style of education injudiciously inculcated the Victorian ideals of femininity, motherhood and homemaking, without consideration of the social realities of the African women's lives.²² Release from the customary restrictions was an important factor in African women's embrace of the colonial education. As Elizabeth Schmidt observes, many women preferred life on mission because, '[t]hey could go to school, they would not be forced to marry against their will, and they could choose a husband without the consent of their guardians.'²³

However, efforts towards educational equality in colonial Rhodesia have a questionable and doubtful history. According to Sybille Kuster, in 1896/97 American board missionaries admitted American, Dutch and African students into their schools at Mount Selinda. However, this experiment with multi-racial education failed, as Dutch parents withdrew their children from the school.²⁴ Kuster contends that the admission of African students to the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1957 was the result of settler antagonism and government reluctance rather than any thoughtful and measured effort by colonial powers.²⁵ Zvobgo argues that under the leadership of the Rhodesia Front party, 'control of higher education and professional training was considered an effective method of keeping Africans from qualifying for positions intended for Europeans. The provision of separate educational facilities for whites and non-whites was maintained and strengthened in pursuit of this objective.'²⁶ The white parliamentarian Rodney Simmonds, in his 26th July speech to the Rhodesian House of Parliament in 1973,

²¹ Sybille Kuster, 'The African Response to Colonial Education and Missionary Activities', in *Neither Cultural Imperialism Nor Precious Gift of Civilization: African Education in Colonial Zimbabwe 1890-1962* (Hamburg: Lit, 1994), p. 86.

²² Kuster, 'The African Response to Colonial Education and Missionary Activities', p. 85.

²³ Elizabeth Schmidt, 'Patriarchy, Capitalism, and the Colonial State in Zimbabwe', *Signs*, 16.4 (1991), p. 748.

²⁴ See Sybille Kuster, 'Colonial Education in the First Three Decades of Colonial Rule, 1890-1920', in *African Education in Colonial Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi: Government Control, Settler Antagonism and African Agency, 1890-1964* (Hamburg: Lit, 1999), pp. 47-48.

²⁵ Kuster, 'The Development of the Colonial Education System After the Second World War: 1945 -1962', p.179.

²⁶ Zvobgo, 'Ideology, Politics and Education: 1962-1979', p. 66.

questioned the University of Rhodesia's multi-racial intake. According to Simmonds, black students were responsible for a drop in living standards; as a result, white students had to 'wade through pools of urine to reach the toilets in the ablution blocks' and to 'put up with being accosted by prostitutes even in their own rooms.' For Simmonds, these 'prostitutes' (who turned out to be women visiting their friends) were part of a 'small group of unruly, irresponsible but nevertheless vociferous and militant young self-styled African nationalists [...] turning this establishment into an ulcer within our society.'²⁷

Colonial Education in a Racially Segregated Rhodesia

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is set in colonial Rhodesia in the 1960s, and describes the educational journey of Tambudzai, or Tambu, from poverty to the more comfortable and prosperous environment of schoolteachers and headmasters. After the sudden death of her elder brother, Tambu seizes the educational opportunity that was denied to her because of her gender. As a result, Tambu's social status changes from a poor village girl to a student at her affluent uncle's mission school, and later at a prestigious multiracial convent. *The Book of Not* (2006) is the sequel to *Nervous Conditions*, and is set in the 1970s during the final intense days of the liberation struggle, known as the second chimurenga. This part of the envisaged trilogy tells the story of Tambu's colonial education and the psychological traumas which she endures as a result of her schooling at a multiracial convent in a racially segregated Rhodesia. Tambu, who is more concerned about other women and their survivals in *Nervous Conditions*, is now preoccupied by her own physical and emotional well-being: 'What I was most interested in was myself and what I would become.'²⁸ However, her intelligence, hard-work, and ambition cannot fight the structures of racism in both colonial and postcolonial eras. The colonial education, which helps her to escape the poverty and misery of her homestead, is now the cause of

²⁷ Cited in A. S. Mlambo, 'Student Protest and State Reaction in Colonial Rhodesia: The 1973 Chimukwembe Student Demonstration at the University of Rhodesia', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21.3 (1995), pp. 473-90 (p. 475).

²⁸ Tsitsi Dangarembga, *The Book of Not* (Banbury: Ayeibia Clarke Publishing, 2006), p. 11.

Tambu's nervous dread. Being a black student in a predominantly white convent is a harrowing experience for her. By the end of *The Book of Not*, Zimbabwe has won the armed struggle for freedom, is an independent country, and Tambu is not only unemployed but also homeless.

Nervous Conditions opens with a matter-of-fact statement which is significant:

I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all. I feel many things these days, much more than I was able to feel in the days when I was young and my brother died, and there are reasons for this more than the mere consequence of age. Therefore I shall not apologize but begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account. For though the event of my brother's passing and the events of my story cannot be separated, my story is not after all about death, but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion – Nyasha, far-minded and isolated, my uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful.²⁹

This opening paragraph highlights many gender related issues. Shona's patriarchal structures deny women the right of education, but the colonising culture is giving them that right. Tambu unapologetically accepts the death of her brother as a price to be paid affording her the opportunity of education. It also associates hope with colonial education which enables Tambu to narrate her story of escape from the agonies of poverty. The community of women, which both Bâ and Emecheta emphasise as key to women's struggles for greater equality and justice also resonates through this extract. Tambu, Lucia,

²⁹ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 1.

Maiguru, and Nyasha need each other in their fight against local and foreign structures of oppression. The colonial education helps both Nyasha and Tambu in their fight against Shona patriarchal structures, and provides them with certain opportunities and benefits. However, in a racially segregated Rhodesia, the same education becomes the cause of their nervous conditions.

Babamukuru, after his missionary education, is conditioned to stay loyal to and respectful of the white laws, as well as to maintain a watchful distance from indigenous culture. The narrator of the *Nervous Conditions* informs the reader that missionaries are very generous towards young African boys as long as they are sure that they will not rebel in any shape or form: 'Whites were indulgent towards promising young black boys in those days, provided that the promise was a peaceful promise, a grateful promise to accept whatever was handed out to them and not to expect more.'³⁰ Babamukuru is headmaster of a mission school, and despite his education, does not question the injustices of the segregated society in which he lives; rather he displays his gratitude towards white missionaries, and his contempt towards native African mores.

As Janice E. Hill argues, missionary schooling, education, social advancement, and economic prosperity were inextricably linked in colonial culture: 'mastery of written and spoken English had currency in Shona society because it provided access to economic power in a way that circumvented race-determined rank.'³¹ Babamukuru's current affluence is due principally to his missionary education, and therefore he and his wife Maiguru are determined to secure the same schooling for their children. However there is a difference between a boys' and a girls' education in Babamukuru's home. Babamukuru sends his son Chido to a boarding school on a scholarship arranged by Mr Baker, the white missionary, but Nyasha is educated at the mission. Tambu's brother, Nhamo, also attends

³⁰ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 108.

³¹ Janice E. Hill, 'Purging a Plate Full of Colonial History: The "Nervous Conditions" of Silent Girls', *College Literature*, 22.1 (1995), p. 79.

school at the mission, but Tambu goes to the village school until his death, and then she takes his place at mission. Tambu suffers greatly under Shona patriarchal codes and customs, and poverty exacerbates an already precarious existence. Her colonial education enables her to question the violence perpetrated by men against the female members of her local community. However, since Tambu considers traditional lore a burden, the same education is also responsible for creating a distance between her and her family, which leaves her not only homeless but also hopeless.

The relationship between the missionaries and Tambu's family is a generation old. This connection was first established through her uncle, Babamukuru. Tambu's grandmother proudly narrates her son's determination and desire to do well in life for himself and for his dependents. His potential was observed by the missionaries, who 'thought he was a good boy, cultivatable, in the way that land is, to yield harvests that sustain the cultivator.'³² They arranged for him to go to secondary school enabling him to gain a scholarship to South Africa. This was vital for his progression within the colonial structure, and this advancement also enhanced his status as a patriarch within his own community. As an educated and prosperous head of a family, Babamukuru is also the decision maker in all the important matters of his extended family; for example, the Christian marriage of his younger brother, Jeremiah, Tambu's father, and Tambu's and her brother Nhamo's education. Babamukuru, who belongs to a very humble background, owes his present successes to the mission. Furthermore, the solid and strong infrastructure of missionary education created the posts he later took up as headmaster of a local school and academic director of the Church's Manicaland Region:

Consciously I thought my direction was clear: I was being educated. When I had been educated, I would find a job and settle down to it, carrying on, in the time that was available before I was married into a new home, Babamukuru's great work of

³² Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 19.

developing the family. Issues were well defined for me at that time: these were the goals and this was how we would reach them. Babamukuru was my touchstone who showed me that this was true.³³

The status of Babamukuru as the patriarchal authority and head of the family in Shona culture is further strengthened by his engagement with the mission. However, his wife, Maiguru, despite her education in England, is restricted to the role of an obedient wife. The colonial education, which made Babamukuru a grand authoritative figure, has also helped his wife to become a schoolteacher, but this does not improve her social status in Rhodesian society. Her salary is used to provide gifts of food to her husband's family, thus reinforcing her marginalised status as she has no right to control her own money.³⁴

Babamukuru, an educated and affluent African, functions within a racially segregated Rhodesian society. His compliance to the racially defined borders signals his recognition of the superiority of the white race. The acceptance of one's inferiority on the basis of race leads to angst and paranoia. This becomes evident when Babamukuru accuses his daughter, Nyasha, of being a 'whore' for spending time talking to the Baker's boy. When Chido tries to defend her sister, Babamukuru reprimands him: "'You, Chido, keep quiet," Babamukuru snapped. "You let your sister behave like a whore without saying anything. Keep quiet."'"³⁵ Janice Hill argues that Nyasha's indiscretion of standing outside alone with a white boy 'could conceivably jeopardize Babamukuru's reputation in his position as the African headmaster of a racially-mixed mission.'³⁶ According to Hill, Babamukuru operates within a missionary and colonial system that restricts the power he holds. He is supposed to exercise this power only within the boundaries that whites grant,

³³ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 153.

³⁴ Michael Gelfand depicts Shona families as being organised and controlled by patriarchal and authoritative systems of rank: 'Husband and wife cannot own property jointly – what is theirs is his. Whatever a woman possesses belongs to him [...] A boy must be respected by his sisters even if he is younger than they are.' See Michael Gelfand, 'Household, Co-ordination and Subordination' in *The Genuine Shona: Survival Values of an African Culture* (Salisbury: Mambo, 1973), pp. 31, 44.

³⁵ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 116.

³⁶ Hill, 'Purging a Plate Full of Colonial History', p. 84.

and '[i]n turn, his willingness to stay within constructed racial boundaries reinforces the higher rank of whites in society.'³⁷ Tambu's experience of education at a prestigious racially-mixed young ladies' college is comparable to Babamukuru's experience as a headmaster of a racially mixed mission school. There is an intense pressure on both of them to stay within their restricted place, which also means an acceptance of their lowly status. Tambu's privileged education becomes a cause for her distress and torment, as her experience as a black student involves being crowded into an 'African dormitory' meant for four rather than six students, located near a sewage system.³⁸ Tambu and few other African girls are scared of crossing the invisible yet inviolable racial lines: 'The girls put up with going to school with us because the nuns gave them a prestigious education. But this did not at all mean these particular white girls could bear the idea or the reality of touching us. [...] We spent a lot of time consumed by this kind of terror. We didn't speak of it amongst ourselves. It was all too humiliating, but the horror of it gnawed within us.'³⁹ The black girls experience humiliation at Sacred Heart. In one embarrassing episode in the school's cafeteria, a white student named Tracey compares the eyes of Ntombi, a black student, to those of a cow, and later says '[i]t's a compliment, hey Ntombi.'⁴⁰ Afterwards, another student, Bougainvillea, makes a comment: "'You know what their eyes are like, hey! And those eyelashes! Whoever's caught a cow putting on mascara?'" She laughed again dryly at the thought of a cow peering into its magnifying mirror.'⁴¹ Ntombi and other African girls have no choice except to pretend to enjoy their debasing treatment at the hands of white students in their school.

Various incidents in Sacred Heart suggest that Tambu, being an African in the multiracial convent, is a contaminant. However, despite the organised humiliation and the

³⁷ Hill, 'Purging a Plate Full of Colonial History', p. 84.

³⁸ Gugu Hlongwane argues that Sacred Heart does not offer any 'prospect of meaningful racial integration' to Tambu. See Gugu Hlongwane, "'A Piece of Person': Fractured Selves and Colonial Education in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *The Book of Not*", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 45.4 (2009), p. 449-458 (p.451).

³⁹ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, pp. 58-59.

⁴⁰ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 46.

⁴¹ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 46.

unhealthy learning environment, Tambu and her classmate Ntombi (one of the few other black pupils at the school) respectively take first and second place in the O-level examination. However, Tambu is not allowed to take credit for this achievement, and the name of her white classmate Tracey is entered in the honour roll instead of hers. Consequently, when Ntombi urges her to speak up about her O-level results, Tambu refuses. Despite the injustice, her faith in colonial education becomes firmer: 'For surely Sacred Heart could not be wrong. This was the place where every ambitious young woman wanted to be educated, the college to which all good and caring parents wished to send their daughters.'⁴² However, in Sacred Heart, there is a fixed five per cent quota for black students from Rhodesia. This further exposes the dishonesty of the education system, which allows only five per cent of black girls across black-dominated colonial Rhodesia to attend multiracial institutions. Black students in Sacred Heart are aware of the implied threat that this quota poses to themselves. During the time of armed struggle in colonial Rhodesia and the subsequent increased polarity between blacks and whites, black students feel vulnerable in the school. The nuns assure them: "We are not going to send anyone away in order to comply. Everybody is perfectly safe, whatever those percentages."⁴³ Sister Emmanuel further guarantees that, with regard to the quotas, "Nobody's going to be cut in half."⁴⁴ This reassurance with piercing words during the violent Rhodesian independence struggle makes Tambu uncomfortable: 'Halves of people! I could not comprehend.'⁴⁵ This suggests Sister Emmanuel's callous attitude towards black students, and also hints at a felt moral superiority of the nuns over the African students. However Tambu understands the meaning of those biting words when Sister Emmanuel writes an insidious letter to Tambu's uncle, Babamukuru, about his niece's alleged complex, which states that Tambu believes herself to be "above convent rules designed for the welfare of

⁴² Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 163.

⁴³ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 73.

⁴⁴ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 72.

⁴⁵ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 72.

the pupils.”⁴⁶ In this threatening letter Sister Emmanuel alludes to Tambu’s act of defiance when she breaks the school rules by using the toilets meant only for the white students: “‘If she is not happy here, perhaps it is best to remove her.’”⁴⁷ This is a shocking suggestion to Tambu, following her signal achievement in the O-level examination: ‘Why did the nun dislike me so much! I had not the least understanding. [...] What had gone wrong? After the headmistress had taken the time to reassure us so kindly, what had I done to make her so aggravated?’⁴⁸ This letter makes Babamukuru angry: when he demands an explanation for Tambu’s behaviour, the only response she can give, in her confusion, is “[i]t’s my eyebrows! [...] ‘They are high. They make me look supercilious.’”⁴⁹ This reply not only shows Tambu’s confused and frustrated state of mind, but is also a comment on an environment in which she is reduced to the role of an intruder, to be slandered and mocked daily by the white students. Again, however, rather than confronting the false accusation, she acquiesces to Babamukuru’s demands and composes a letter of apology to Sister Emmanuel – spending ‘the rest of the evening making [her] phrases of self-deprecation yet more annihilating.’⁵⁰

The Role of Class and Gender in Colonial Education

Class anxiety is a crucial factor in Tambu’s reluctance to denounce the partialities and discriminations of the colonial schooling she receives. Tambu and Nyasha have a different start in their lives. Tambu aspires to follow Babamukuru’s example, while Nyasha maintains a cautious and watchful distance from her father. Tambu experienced poverty during her childhood, therefore, rejecting material prosperity and a prestigious education is not an option for her. Nyasha is disappointed with Tambu’s decision to go to the multiracial convent, arguing that there are ‘more evils than advantages to be reaped from

⁴⁶ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 89.

⁴⁷ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 89.

⁴⁸ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, pp. 88-89.

⁴⁹ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 90.

⁵⁰ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 92.

such an opportunity.’⁵¹ But for Tambu at this juncture, there are few grey areas in colonial education, and everything promises affluence, social advancement and cultural kudos: ‘I would go. I was sure of myself. I was not sceptical like Nyasha. How could I possibly forget my brother and the mealies, my mother and the latrine and the wedding?’⁵² Tambu has suffered intensely from the patriarchal and even misogynistic aspects of Shona culture that sanction her subjection and maltreatment by denying her education. Therefore, when she arrives at the mission and then later at Sacred Heart, she seizes upon this opportunity with great zeal, since education is her indisputable and unquestionable ideal which promises a comfortable and luxurious life. This hope of a prosperous future has made her brother’s death not simply an event of sadness for her. Nhamo’s death has opened the door to a potentially bright future for her through education.

Tambu realises later that her education has stunted ‘the growth of [her] faculty of criticism, sapped the energy that in childhood [she] had used to define [her] own position.’⁵³ Her only model is Babamukuru, who secures money, prestige, and power following his education by white missionaries. Although Tambu gets upset when Babamukuru calls Nyasha a ‘whore’, however she does not question Babamukuru’s insulting behaviour. Instead, she takes ‘refuge in the image of the grateful poor female relative. That made everything a lot easier.’⁵⁴ For Tambu in her early days at the mission, the real situation was this: ‘Babamukuru was God, therefore I had arrived in Heaven.’⁵⁵

Tambu’s idea of ‘God’ is directly connected with the schooling, which will, she hopes, lead her upwards to a heaven of material affluence and contentment. However this fantasy starts to crumble when she comes face to face with Christianity. Christian ideology deems Tambu’s parents’ marriage illegitimate as it is based on indigenous rather than

⁵¹ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, pp. 181-182.

⁵² Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 182.

⁵³ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 167.

⁵⁴ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 118.

⁵⁵ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 70.

Christian social structures. Fanon argues that ‘the colonial world is a Manichean world [...] [that] paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil.’⁵⁶ He further states that ‘the customs of colonized people [...] are the very sign of [...] poverty of spirit and of their constitutional depravity.’⁵⁷ Colonised people were influenced to relinquish their indigenous culture and embrace the supposedly superior culture of the coloniser. The extent of the violence of this process was unknown to the coloniser, whose ‘Manichaeism’, according to Fanon, ‘goes to its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly, it turns him into an animal. In fact the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms.’⁵⁸ As a result of this Manichaeism, colonisers not only humiliated natives, but also degraded their culture without any weight of consciousness.⁵⁹ Jeanette Treiber argues that Tambu is shaped by the ‘Manichean Christian symbolic structure of sin and salvation’, and is therefore shocked to find herself on the side of sin.⁶⁰ Tambu’s literal

⁵⁶ Frantz Fanon, ‘Concerning Violence’, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 32.

⁵⁷ Fanon, ‘Concerning Violence’, p. 32.

⁵⁸ Fanon, ‘Concerning Violence’, pp. 32-33.

⁵⁹ As useful as Fanon’s ideas are for understanding *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga’s novel also elaborates Fanon’s works by exploring in more detail the impact of colonialism and indigenous patriarchal structures on women. Numerous critics have drawn attention to this gap in Fanon’s writing. For example, Anne McClintock notes what she calls a ‘curious rupture’ (p.97) in Fanon’s essay ‘Algeria Unveiled’. She argues that ‘Fanon’s thoughts on women’s agency proceed through a series of contradictions’ (p.97). McClintock’s discussion traces the incongruity of Fanon’s perception that the veil is ‘open to the subtlest shifts and subversions’ with his simultaneous ‘refusal to grant the veil any prior role in the gender dynamics of Algerian society’ (p.97). She further argues that Fanon’s account of Algerian women’s participation in the revolution as a ‘designated agency – an agency by invitation only’ (p.98); see Anne McClintock, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Gender, Race and Nationalism”, in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 1997), pp. 89-112. Françoise Verges contends that for Fanon colonialism acted as a screen obfuscating the complexity of social and cultural reality; see Françoise Verges, ‘Chains of Madness, Chains of Colonialism: Fanon and Freedom’, in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representations*, ed. Alan Read (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), pp. 46-75. Kelli Donovan Wixson argues that statements in ‘Algeria Unveiled’, in which Fanon refers to Algerian women’s veils as a ‘formerly inert element’, and an ‘undifferentiated element in a homogeneous whole’ (Frantz Fanon, ‘Algeria Unveiled’, in *A Dying Colonization*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (NY: Grove Press, 1965), pp.46-47) show that he does not differentiate among the varied reasons why Algerian women would wear the veil, or even recognize that such diverse possibilities exist; see Kelli Donovan Wixson, ‘Women and Food in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*’, in *Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga*, pp.189-221. See also Deepika Bahri, ‘Disembodying the Corpus: Postcolonial Pathology in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*’, *Postmodern Culture*, 5.1 (1994), https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v005/5.1bahri.html [accessed 30th January 2013]. Bahri argues that women in *Nervous Conditions* are not passive objects; rather, they are strong and complicated beings simultaneously using and being used by colonial and native patriarchal structures.

⁶⁰ See Jeanette Treiber, ‘Strategic Fusion: Undermining Cultural Essentialism in *Nervous Conditions*’, in *Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga*, p. 93.

understanding of sin is that it ‘had to be avoided because it was deadly. I could see it. It was definitely black, we were taught. It had well-defined edges, and it was square rather than round so that you knew where it ended. It worked like a predatory vacuum, drawing the incautious into itself and never letting them out. And now Babamukuru was saying that this was where my parents were, which meant myself and my sisters too.’⁶¹

Babamukuru’s persistence that Tambu’s parents have a Christian wedding challenges her legitimate existence, which causes her to confront her uncle for the first time. Tambu refuses to become part of a wedding ‘that made a mockery of the people [she] belonged to and placed doubt on [her] legitimate existence.’⁶² This episode not only suggests Babamukuru’s psychological colonisation, but also depicts imperial arrogance and disrespect towards African religions. Both Christianity and Shona religions are mono-deist. According to Ibbo Mandaza, the concept of the Christian God is equivalent to the High God in Shona, called Mwari.⁶³ Mandaza observes that Christianity features ‘the practice of praying to the saints, which in an African understanding, could be seen to resemble the service and respect to the *vadzimu* in Shona religion.’⁶⁴ But Babamukuru’s colonial education leads him to delegitimise the Shona religion and glorify Christianity. On the morning of the wedding, Tambu refuses to obey the command of Babamukuru and does not attend the wedding of her parents. This confrontation resuscitates Tambu’s critical faculties, as she starts questioning and challenging Babamukuru’s decision over her parents’ wedding. However, she does not allow her critical potentials to grow any further, as she becomes scared of ending up like her mother – living in the extreme poverty of her homestead – and Tambu resolves to study at the Young Ladies’ College of the Sacred Heart.

⁶¹ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, pp. 152-153.

⁶² Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 165.

⁶³ See Ibbo Mandaza, ‘Education in Zimbabwe: The Colonial Framework and the Response of the National Liberation Movement’, in *Zimbabwe: Towards a New Order: An Economic and Social Survey: Working Papers*, 2 vols (Geneva: United Nations, 1980), pp. 341-400.

⁶⁴ Mandaza, ‘Education in Zimbabwe’, p. 364.

On the day of Tambu's arrival at the multi-racial convent, Nyasha asks her father if he is sure it is the right place: "“What do you mean?” growled my uncle. “Of course this is the place!” his foot pressed down, certainly unconsciously, on the accelerator, sending us swinging over a hump which left our stomachs behind and caused Maiguru and me to catch our breath sharply, while Nyasha let out a sharp yelp.”⁶⁵ This response suggests that Babamukuru experienced racism during his education, causing him to feel unnerved when his daughter implies that black students will not be accepted at the school. This fear of illegitimacy shows why Babamukuru quietly and unquestioningly accepts the nun's explanation that six girls have to share a room (and cupboard space) meant for four. This embodies the neurotic effects which are the result of living in a racially divided Rhodesian society. As Susan Z. Andrade argues that apart from Nyasha there are other characters in the novel who are also suffering from nervous conditions:

For example Babamukuru against whom Nyasha is in constant rebellion, also experiences stress, poor eating habits, and bad nerves. [...] One might well see Babamukuru's assiduous and patently patriarchal attempts to supervise the sexuality (both in the budding form of his daughter and in the more mature and non-monogamous forms of Lucia and Jeremiah) as a metaphor for the action of the disempowered. The harmful repercussions of Babamukuru's humiliation of Ma'Shingayi and Jeremiah via the Christian marriage he imposes, his acute repression of Nyasha's choice of dress, her occasional flirtatiousness, and reading material as well as his compelling her to eat are obvious at the surface level of the story. At a secondary level, however, that a colonized adult would seek to control what bodily practices he can through benevolent tyranny serves to underscore his

⁶⁵ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 197.

own powerlessness in a system in which he is ostensibly a star product and emblem of power, itself a tragic effect.⁶⁶

Tambu in her naivety and in her idealism of colonial education is not ready to accept that ‘Babamukuru [is] a historical artefact’:⁶⁷ a native who is not born but made. As Fanon asserts in *The Wretched of the Earth*, ‘it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence.’⁶⁸

Nyasha, on the other hand, openly defies her father Babamukuru’s patriarchal authority. Tambu cannot afford to question and challenge Babamukuru and the values he represents. However, Nyasha’s comfortable life style (the result of her parents’ colonial education) has given her the opportunity to rebel and ask probing, uncomfortable questions. She manifests her rebellion in her everyday life. She wears a ‘tiny dress [...] hardly enough of it to cover her thighs. She was self-conscious though, constantly clasping her hands behind her buttocks to prevent her dress from riding up.’⁶⁹ She reads D. H. Lawrence, and flirts with boys. Babamukuru, being a Rhodesian patriarch cannot accept this behaviour. When he furiously condemns her conduct – an event which Derek Wright calls an outburst of ‘prurient sexual jealousy’⁷⁰ – Nyasha calmly answers: “‘You know me. [...] I don’t worry about what people think so there’s no need for you too.’”⁷¹ About this, however, she is wrong, and Babamukuru hits her in response to her retaliation. He tries to control her through her body, and forces her to finish her meals, which she does every time, but afterwards throws up to get rid of them. Nyasha’s regurgitation of the food symbolises her

⁶⁶ Susan Z. Andrade, ‘Tradition, Modernity, and the Family: Reading the *Chimurenga* Struggle Into and Out of *Nervous Conditions*’, in *Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga*, p. 51.

⁶⁷ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 162.

⁶⁸ Fanon, ‘Concerning Violence’, p. 28.

⁶⁹ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 37.

⁷⁰ Derek Wright, ‘Regurgitating Colonialism: The Feminist Voice in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*’, in *New Directions in African Fictions* (London: Twayne, 1997), p. 118.

⁷¹ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 116.

revolt against her father's colonial values.⁷² Her rebellion as a colonised Rhodesian woman against her father's patriarchal arrogance and colonial structures leads to her mental breakdown.

In Shona culture a beautiful woman is considered inherently iniquitous.⁷³ In traditional Shona society, girls who are not in control of their sexualities can pose a threat to their family's honour and status. Therefore virginity is considered invaluable, and demonstrates that men are in control of their property and are able to police and defend their borders.⁷⁴ However, Nyasha ridicules this virginity syndrome: "I wish I had done it", she said, brandishing a tampon at me, "but the only thing that will ever get up there at this rate is this! "Honestly, even on my wedding day they will be satisfied only if I promise not to enjoy it.""⁷⁵ Nyasha's consciousness is a complex mixture of English and Shona values. However, she believes that personal integrity should not be derived from either Shona or colonial structures, but rather should be dependent upon an individual's ability to make final moral discriminations and nuanced ethical judgements.⁷⁶ On her return to Rhodesia from England, she observes the deprivation of her impoverished relatives, and how the racially segregated society is making existence for poor black people even more thankless and challenging. She is interested in 'real people, real peoples and their sufferings: the conditions in South Africa, which she asked Maiguru to compare with [their] [...] situation and ended up arguing with her when Maiguru said we were better off.'⁷⁷ Clare Barker argues that the threat of malnutrition and hunger to Nyasha's extended family at the

⁷² See Kelli Donavon Wixon, 'Women and Food in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*', in *Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga*, pp. 221-30; and Heidi Creamer, 'An Apple for the Teacher? Femininity, Coloniality, and Food in *Nervous Conditions*', *Kunapipi*, 16.1 (1994), pp. 349-60.

⁷³ See Rudo Barbara Gaidzanwa, *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature* (Harare: College Press, 1985).

⁷⁴ See Martin Carolyn Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex and Class in Kenya* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

⁷⁵ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 121.

⁷⁶ See Martin Carolyn Shaw, "'You Had a Daughter, But I am Becoming a Woman': Sexuality, Feminism and Postcoloniality in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Condition*", *Research in African Literatures*, 38.4 (2007), pp. 7-27; and Paulina Ada Uwakweh, 'Debunking Patriarchy: The Liberational Quality of Voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*', *Research in African Literatures*, 26.1 (1995), pp. 75-84.

⁷⁷ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, pp. 94-95.

homestead plays a crucial role in her refusal of food.⁷⁸ According to Barker, Nyasha's 'sensitivity to the inequality of food distribution, her references to hunger, and her resulting refusal to eat' constitute her rebellion against discriminatory and prejudiced social system, 'a well-meant (but misplaced) gesture of solidarity' with her indigent cousin.⁷⁹

Nyasha's rebellion against the xenophobic structures of her society culminates in her nervous breakdown. The intelligent and confident voice of Nyasha becomes obscure and disorganised with the progression of the plot and, after her emotional collapse, her voice disappears from the narrative; when we hear from her again in *The Book of Not*, it is the voice of resignation and withdrawal. Giuliana Lund argues that Nyasha's anorexia is a rebellion against gender constructs.⁸⁰ I disagree and lean more towards Heather Zwicker, who argues that 'the causes of Nyasha's anorexia are multiple and cannot necessarily be distinguished from one another.'⁸¹ A sense of loss dominates the calamitous scene that immediately leads to Nyasha's actual diagnosis. During this breakdown, she realises the extent of the damage inflicted upon her country, her family, and especially her father:

'They have done it to me', she accused, whispering still. 'Really, they have.' And then she became stern. 'It's not their fault. They did it to them too. You know they did,' she whispered. 'To both of them, but especially to him. They put him through it all. But it's not his fault, he's good.' Her voice took on a Rhodesian accent. 'He's a good boy, a good munt. A bloody good kaffir,' she informed in sneering sarcastic tones. Then she was whispering again. 'Why do they do it Tambu,' she hissed bitterly, her face contorting with rage, 'to me and to you and to him? [...] She

⁷⁸ See Clare Barker, 'Self-starvation in the Context of Hunger: Health, Normalcy and the "terror of the possible" in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 44.2 (2008), pp. 115-125.

⁷⁹ Barker, 'Self-starvation in the Context of Hunger', p. 117.

⁸⁰ See Giuliana Lund, 'Dangarembga's Dirty Work: Acting Up and Speaking Out, "Good Medicine" for Africa', in *Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga*, pp. 161-187.

⁸¹ Heather Zwicker, 'The Nervous Collusions of Nation and Gender: Tsitsi Dangarembga's Challenge to Fanon', in *Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga*, p. 16.

rampaged, shredding her history book between her teeth ('Their history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies.'), breaking mirrors, her clay pots, anything she could lay her hands on and jabbing the fragments viciously into her flesh, stripping the bedclothes, tearing her clothes from the wardrobe and trampling them underfoot. 'They have trapped us. They have trapped us. But I won't be trapped. I am not a good girl. I won't be trapped.'⁸²

Nyasha's destruction of her history books suggests her refusal to accept the official account of the nation-state, one approved by the colonisers for the colonised Rhodesians. Nyasha has no access to the clandestine, buried or secret version of this history, as her father is a colonial product, and her mother, despite her education is restricted to a peripheral place sanctioned by Shona patriarchal values, and she has never met her grandmother, who is the only contact with the other side of the story. Nyasha's textbooks are devoid of her history. They are products of censorship, ideological interference and control, suppressing vital knowledge, and manufacturing an artificial and ultimately damaging vision of the nation-state. Nyasha is living in an environment that does not acknowledge her ancestral history; rather, mediated by her textbooks, it teaches her that her history begins with the advent of colonisation and its mission of 'civilising' the savage. However, Tambu, on the other hand, is fortunate enough to spend some time with her grandmother. Therefore the history she learns is different from what Nyasha was exposed to. Tambu remarks that this was a history 'that could not be found in the textbook.'⁸³ From her grandmother, Tambu learns the exploitation of their land by the 'white wizards', the dislocation of indigenous peoples, and the devastations caused by the system of migrant labour in South African 'glittering gold mines': 'The white wizard had no use for women and children. He threw my grandmother and her children off his farm. Destitute, they travelled back to the homestead, where my great-grandfather, although he had not regained

⁸² Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, pp. 204-205.

⁸³ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 17.

his former standard of living, had managed to keep the family together. And then my great-grandfather died and the family broke up.’⁸⁴ She learns too how her grandmother sent her eldest son Babamukuru to the missionaries and ‘begged them to prepare him for life in their world.’⁸⁵

Tambu is impressed by the success of her uncle, but she also acknowledges that he has paid a high price:

My uncle became prosperous and respected, well enough salaried to reduce a little the meagreness of his family’s existence. This indicated that life could be lived with a modicum of dignity in any circumstances if you worked hard enough and obeyed the rules. Yes, it was a romantic story, the way my grandmother told it. The suffering was not minimised but the message was clear: endure and obey, for there is no other way. She was so proud of her eldest son, who had done exactly this.⁸⁶

This ‘endure and obey’ formula structured the life of Babamukuru. This further explains his nervous behaviour when his daughter questions the legitimacy of colonial education, and the multiracial convent, and tries to cross the boundaries of race by staying outside with Baker’s boys in the night. Babamukuru’s acceptance of the coloniser’s culture, his colonial education, and the subsequent prosperity combine to reinforce his distance and difference from indigenous communities and customs. The only value of Shona culture which he still holds is his patriarchal privilege, and the right of having absolute control over female bodies. Since he himself has abandoned Shona traditions, he wants Nyasha to accept the burden of that tradition, predominantly through her sexuality, but what he fails

⁸⁴ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, pp. 18-19.

⁸⁵ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 19.

⁸⁶ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 19.

to understand is that his daughter's rebellion is not only against the exploitation of imperialism, but is also against his Shona patriarchal authority.⁸⁷

Nyasha has spent a few years of her childhood in England, which also plays an important part in her character building. She realises that her parents are uncomfortable with her hybrid condition: “‘now they are stuck with hybrids for children. And they don't like it. [...] They think we do it on purpose, so it offends them.’”⁸⁸ However, this hybrid condition enables her to see that her mother, despite her education in England, works within the peripheral space designated to her by Shona patriarchal culture. Being a product of both Shona and English values, she can see the emotional and psychological violence being done to her country and her people: “‘It's bad enough [...] when a country gets colonised, but when the people do as well! That's the end, really, that's the end!’”⁸⁹ Tambu, on the other hand, has no experience of the coloniser's culture, therefore she cannot understand the complexity of her decision to study in a multiracial convent, but Nyasha comprehends it and explains to her: ‘The process [...] was called assimilation, and that was what was intended for the precocious few who might prove a nuisance if left to themselves. [...] So they made a little space [...] an honorary space in which you could join them and they could make sure that you behaved yourself.’⁹⁰ In *The Book of Not*, the nuns make sure that Tambu behaves herself at the convent.

Colonial Education and Internalised Inferiority

For Tambu, cultural and technological modernity comes in the form of a colonial education and the coloniser's culture, and she wholeheartedly aspires to embrace both of them.

Therefore Nyasha's mental collapse does not discourage her from pursuing her ambition.

Biman Basu contends that colonialism attempts to discipline the native, and education is

⁸⁷ See Therese Saliba, ‘On the Bodies of Third World Women: Cultural Impurity, Prostitution, and Other Nervous Conditions’, *College Literature*, 22.1 (1995), p. 142.

⁸⁸ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 79.

⁸⁹ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 150.

⁹⁰ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 182.

used as a technology to achieve this goal.⁹¹ She further suggests that this mechanism is aimed at bodies. In this whole process, ‘bodies are trained, bodily functions regulated, gestures are acquired, postures cultivated, styles are adopted, and attitudes assumed.’⁹² Nhamo forgets how to speak his native Shona language after spending just one year in mission school. Tambu criticises Nyasha’s and Chido’s inability to speak Shona after their return from England: ‘Shona was our language. What did people mean when they forgot it? [...] I remembered speaking to my cousins freely and fluently before they went away [...] Now they had turned into strangers. I stopped being offended and was sad instead.’⁹³ However, Tambu’s contact with colonial education gradually changes her perspective about her indigenous culture and values: ‘the more I saw of worlds beyond homestead the more I was convinced that the further we left the old ways behind the closer we came to progress.’⁹⁴ Therefore she considers her desire for Sacred Heart as ‘only natural’:

A prestigious private school that manufactured guaranteed young ladies. At that convent, which was just outside town but on the other side, to the south, you wore pleated terylene skirts to school every day and on Sunday a tailor-made two-piece linen suit with gloves, yes, even with gloves! We all wanted to go. That was only natural. But only two places were on offer, two places for all the African Grade Seven girls in the country.⁹⁵

What Tambu considers ‘natural’ is a ‘cultivated’ desire; a direct result of British imperialism. The image of Sacred Heart as a school that ‘manufactured guaranteed young ladies’ suggests the idea of school as factory, training the girls to become model young women befitting the prevailing British mores, through carefully rehearsed artifice – a

⁹¹ See Biman Basu, ‘Trapped and Troping: Allegories of the Transnational Intellectual in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*’, in *Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga*, pp. 251-271.

⁹² Basu, ‘Trapped and Troping’, p. 256.

⁹³ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, pp. 42-43.

⁹⁴ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 150.

⁹⁵ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 181.

production line of unquestioning young ladies, programmed to accept the colonisers' culture through a colonial education.

The materially comfortable environment of Sacred Heart has made Tambu distant from the world to which she actually belongs. Consequently, she suffers from 'private', 'secret', and 'insidious trauma'⁹⁶ on a regular basis in her new world at Sacred Heart. Maria Root argues that insidious traumas begin early in life before the victim fully understands the 'psychological meaning of the maliciousness of the wounds, for example, a child is told he or she is not the right person to play with – too poor, wrong colour etc.'⁹⁷ According to Root, insidious traumas are not necessarily violent to the physical body at the given moment, but do violence to the soul and spirit of the victim.⁹⁸ We witness the violated soul of Tambu at the end of the second part of this envisaged trilogy. The passionate, resolute, and ambitious girl in *Nervous Conditions* who decides to grow and sell maize in order to raise funds for her education, who unapologetically accepts the death of her brother for her educational opportunities, and who questions the prejudices of Shona culture towards women, is acquiescent in *The Book of Not*. In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu disparages her sister, Netsai as 'the type that will make a sweet, sad wife.'⁹⁹ However, in *The Book of Not*, it is her sister Netsai, who retains her sense of belonging and identity. She does not aspire to become English Rhodesian; rather she resists the culture of the coloniser, and decides to become a guerrilla fighter for the freedom of her people. Tambu's education in a multiracial convent in a racially divided Rhodesia does her more harm than good, as she struggles to 'become more of a person,'¹⁰⁰ and feels so far removed from herself that

⁹⁶ Rosanne Kennedy, 'Mortgaged Futures: Trauma, Subjectivity, and the Legacies of Colonialism', *Studies in the Novel*, 40. 1 / 2 (2008), p. 89; see also Laura S. Brown, 'Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 100-112 (p. 102).

⁹⁷ Maria Root, 'Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality', in *Personality and Psychotherapy: Feminist Reappraisals*, ed. Laura Brown and Mary Ballou (New York & London: The Guilford Press, 1992), p. 241.

⁹⁸ Root, 'Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality', p. 241.

⁹⁹ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 9.

she finds it difficult to recognise her own voice at times.¹⁰¹ When Tambu returns to school after *morari*, where Babamukuru is pugnaciously tortured by the black nationalists for sending her to a white school, and Netsai loses her leg in a landmine accident, she feels subdued in the convent. Her anguish is increased by her scalding sense of inferiority that derives from having been at a scene which would be described as primitive according to her colonial education. For Tambu, the *morari* recalls European images of Africans ‘from the school’s films and library: cavemen dragging their women where they wanted them by the hair or bludgeoning their prey. And in the final analysis there was everyone, sitting mesmerised and agreeing about the appropriateness of this behaviour.’¹⁰² This internalised inferiority makes her suffer more acutely at the convent, and her only defence against this is to make herself more detached and reserved from her family and her home. However, there is agony and pain in this separation: ‘Sometimes a tear trickled towards my nose and I had to rub, pretending something had fallen into my eye.’¹⁰³ Tambu is a victim of her colonial education in a white Rhodesia of black Rhodesians.

The African philosophy of *unhu* that Tambu understands as ‘I be well so that others could be well also,’¹⁰⁴ is difficult to maintain in a racially segregated Rhodesia. In Shona culture, there is a certain human connection, which makes it obligatory to show generosity, warmth and empathy towards other members of the community. This human connectedness is called *unhu*, which means that a person becomes human only by showing compassion, kindness, and charity towards others.¹⁰⁵ Different southern African nations and cultures have different names for *unhu*. According to Desmond Tutu: ‘A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from

¹⁰¹ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 56.

¹⁰² Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 28.

¹⁰³ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁴ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 103.

¹⁰⁵ See Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, ‘A Zimbabwean Ethic of Humanity: Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *The Book of Not* & the *Unhu* Philosophy of Personhood’, *African Literature Today*, 27 (2010), pp. 117-129.

knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.’¹⁰⁶ This moral responsibility towards the well-being of other human beings is also present in many other African cultures.¹⁰⁷ Tambu is very proud of her *unhu*, and considers it important for the progress and prosperity of Rhodesia:

Unhu, that profound knowledge of being, quietly and not flamboyantly; the grasp of life and of how to preserve and accentuate life’s eternal interweavings that we southern Africans are famed for, what others now call *Ubuntu*, demanded [...] that I be well so that others could be well also. [...] You only had to look at Babamukuru. He had inspired me to be hardworking and useful. Perhaps one day I would inspire someone else to be hardworking and useful too. We could end up with a nation of inspiring, useful, hardworking people, like the British and the Americans, and all other Europeans who were guiding us and helping us in our struggle.¹⁰⁸

The above paragraph demonstrates that Tambu’s memories of her childhood destitution and her sufferings under Shona patriarchal structures have hindered her ability to comprehend how a racially segregated society functions. She includes the British colonisers of Rhodesia in her idea of *unhu* without fully grasping the reality of Rhodesia. Her idea of *unhu* begins to fall apart as her education progresses in the convent. There is no doubt that her education enables her to move out of the homestead, and gives her a better financial start in life than her mother, although she loses herself in this process. Despite racism in the convent, she wants this principle of *unhu* to provide her with guidance towards her ambition and her deeds. Tambu’s struggle to sustain her *unhu*, and finally her

¹⁰⁶ Desmond Tutu, ‘Nuremberg or National Amnesia? A Third Way’, in *No Future Without Forgiveness* (London: Rider Press, 1999), p. 35.

¹⁰⁷ See B. Nussbaum, ‘African Culture and Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African in America’, *World Business Academy*, 17.1 (2003), pp. 1-12.

¹⁰⁸ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, pp. 102-103.

despair at the close of the novel operates as a bitter indictment of a society which is structured along racial lines. Tambu suffered in colonial Rhodesia due to racial discrimination, and is still suffering in an independent Zimbabwe.

Tambu's faith in *unhu* is fractured by her awareness of herself as black in a white environment. In one scene at school, she becomes visibly upset when she is unable to translate a Latin sentence. Sister Catherine rubs her hands in an effort to calm her down, but this makes her feel uncomfortable: 'Sister and I were in physical contact [...] my first impression was I had soiled my teacher in some way. I liked her and I did not want to do that. Sister should not touch me.'¹⁰⁹ Her idea of her blackness as a contagion is further strengthened by the different ways in which the nannies serve the European and African students. When they attend white students, they 'move fluidly, but when they set a jug or a plate before Ntombi or me, they smack it down with a jut of the chin and spills, as though slapping a hard, crushing thing down on obnoxious crawling objects.'¹¹⁰

Tambu is a victim of Rhodesia's policy of segregation. However, she displays a limited resistance against the segregation by using the forbidden white toilets in the all-white dormitories. The punishment for breaching the boundaries is harsh, a *black* mark is entered against her name, and the entire African dormitory is disgraced by Sister Emmanuel at the school assembly for clogging the school's sewerage system with feminine pads. However, Tambu's resistance due to her damaged *unhu* remains incomplete. In spite of confronting the nuns for not providing the black students with incinerators for the proper disposal of feminine items, Tambu immerses herself in the distress of being 'a biologically blasphemous person.'¹¹¹ This shows her lack of energy to even fight for herself, let alone Nyasha, Maiguru, and Lucia about whom she was concerned in *Nervous Conditions*.

¹⁰⁹ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, pp. 31-32.

¹¹⁰ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 46.

¹¹¹ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 64.

The energetic girl of *Nervous Conditions* has become the epitome of jaded ennui in the *Book of Not*. Having been taught that everything native is irrational, while everything white is rational, she initially buys into this with intense hope and enthusiasm: 'I read everything from Enid Blyton to the Brontë sisters, and responded to them all. Plunging into these books I knew I was being educated and I was filled with gratitude to the authors for introducing me to places where reason and inclination were not at odds.'¹¹² Therefore, Tambu is astounded by Nyasha's reading of an African book: '*A Grain of Wheat*, written as far as I could see, by [...] a starving Kenyan author. I sighed in regretful surprise at the changes in my cousin's character as a result of either the illness itself or the life she lived or the drugs she was taking.'¹¹³ Tambu's association of poverty exclusively with Africa, and her suggestion that Nyasha's reading of an African author is either due to her illness or due to some drugs, reflects Tambu's distance from her own culture. Rosanne Kennedy has suggested Berlant's concept of cruel optimism as a possible line of investigation in order to understand the psychological traumas of colonisation.¹¹⁴ Lauren Berlant defines cruel optimism 'as a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic.'¹¹⁵ According to Berlant, 'what's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects [...] might not well endure the loss of their objects/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being.'¹¹⁶ Tambu's 'cruel optimism' reaches its peak when she volunteers to knit Balaclava helmets and scarves for the occupying Rhodesian troops in order to secure, what she describes as 'our common security!'¹¹⁷

¹¹² Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 94.

¹¹³ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, pp. 117-118.

¹¹⁴ Kennedy 'Mortgaged Futures', p. 101.

¹¹⁵ Lauren Berlant, 'Cruel Optimism', in *Cruel Optimism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 24.

¹¹⁶ Berlant, 'Cruel Optimism', p. 24.

¹¹⁷ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 148.

However, the allure of her colonial education soon diminishes. Tambu becomes aware of the disintegration of her *unhu*, when she fails to feel sympathy for the white boys at the nearby Mt Sinai school, who are in the firing line of the mortars of the freedom struggle. This discovery shocks her and she wonders, ‘if living with them [white people] was making [her] as bad as they were.’¹¹⁸ Despite this realisation, her fear of ending up like her mother prevents her from taking any brave and confident decision against the bias and prejudice of the white educational system and the wider environment such a system is part of.

As the armed struggle intensifies in colonial Rhodesia, the science teacher does not arrive from Europe. As a result, students studying science subjects are taken to a segregated boy’s school. Tambu is excluded from this trip, and again she experiences her blackness as a failing despite her brilliant O-level results. She is left to study on her own without any guidance or a teacher. Tambu gets more confused as a result of this exclusion, and suffers from immense shame, and then finally questions her Rhodesian identity: ‘Frustrated. [...] I wondered, was I a Rhodesian, if I could not sit on Rhodesian seats, read formulae from a Rhodesian blackboard and press down upon Rhodesian desks?’¹¹⁹ The fundamental construction of Tambu’s society is based upon the rejection of her race, and her poverty has made her unable to perceive the grievous flaws in that system. Therefore in her moments of depression, she just simply cannot bring herself to see the faults with Sacred Heart: ‘I scarcely knew anymore who or where I was. I saw I would never find the route back to the place I had aimed at, yet I could not see where I had taken a wrong turning. For surely Sacred Heart could not be wrong.’¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 101.

¹¹⁹ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 153.

¹²⁰ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 163.

Racism and Zimbabwe

Tambu's sufferings do not end with national independence. In a 'free' Zimbabwe, after a succession of low-paid menial jobs, she eventually finds work as a copy editor in an advertising agency in Harare. Her old schoolmate Tracey, who was favoured by the nuns in Sacred Heart and consequently took the trophy despite Tambu's brilliant results in her O-level exams, is now an executive in the same agency. The racism which Tambu faced in Sacred Heart, persists and manifests itself in myriad subtle forms, such as when Dick, supported by Tracey, takes credit for Tambu's creative work. Dick tells Tambu that the boss loves her Afro-Shine copy, but has asked him to present it to the client. Tambu, who again in her naivety believes that independence will correct every wrong, and might help her in rebuilding her *unhu*, is now demoralised: 'I thought bitterly, like everything else about me was incorrect. My copy was not good enough; under someone else's name, it was.'¹²¹

However, the racism of postcolonial Zimbabwe is not limited to her professional life, since she experiences it in her daily existence in the same way that she experienced it in colonial Rhodesia. Tambu has high expectations of independence, as she observes: 'What a satisfaction it was to know one was now included! Nor was there need to fear one's presence might cause that infamous deterioration in standards.'¹²² However, The Twiss Hostel for single girls, her new accommodation, still displays the sign, stating "right of admission reserved."¹²³ This hostel has only a few black residents, and Tambu again suffers from shame and humiliation resulting from her race being perceived as a visible marker of her cultural inferiority. The landlady, Mrs May, repeatedly confuses her with another resident named Isabel despite Tambu's numerous efforts to correct her politely. Tambu realises that she had 'not been recognised [...] as an individual person but

¹²¹ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 236.

¹²² Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 203.

¹²³ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 203.

as a lump broken from a greater one of undifferentiated flesh! [...] [She] was terribly grieved.’¹²⁴ This attests to the legacy of Rhodesian racism even in an ostensibly postcolonial Zimbabwe. The racism of Tambu’s colonial education and the racism of her professional life in post-independence Zimbabwe have twisted her understanding of home. In order to have some sense of relief and an idea about what constitutes home, Tambu has to embark on a massive project of remembering. According to Dangarembga:

I think the problem of forgetting – remembering and forgetting – is really important. What is interesting is that Nyasha as an individual does not have anything to forget: she simply does not know. [...] She obviously feels some great big gap inside her and that she ought to remember it because this is her heritage. [...] Tambudzai on the other hand I think is quite valid in saying that she can’t forget because she has that kind of experience Nyasha is so worried about forgetting because it’s not there for her to remember. Tambudzai is so sure that this is the framework of her very being that there is no way that she would be able to forget it.¹²⁵

But what Tambu remembers is a world of poverty and unrelieved misery, and she therefore considers the memory of her past to be a burden and embarrassment, while the place in which she wants so badly to be recognised does not accept or encourage her. In *Manichean Aesthetics*, Abdul JanMohamed argues that the colonial encounter has created a ‘colonial pathology’¹²⁶ that places the colonised and coloniser in absolute opposition to each other. The coloniser wishes to civilise the native; however, if he succeeds, he will lose his ‘privileged social and material status [...] [and] his sense of moral superiority.’¹²⁷ Therefore he must perpetuate the impression of the colonised’s savagery and barbarism

¹²⁴ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 207.

¹²⁵ Tsitsi Dangarembga, Jane Wilkinson, ‘Tsitsi Dangarembga’, in *Talking with African Writers: Interviews with African Poets, Playwrights and Novelists*, ed. Jane Wilkinson (London: James Currey, 1992), pp. 191-192.

¹²⁶ Abdul R. JanMohamed, ‘Chinua Achebe: The Generation of Realism’, in *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), p. 152.

¹²⁷ JanMohamed, ‘Introduction’, in *Manichean Aesthetics*, p. 5.

‘for his very identity.’¹²⁸ The colonised, on the other hand, is forced to adopt the ‘superior’ culture of the coloniser and thus lose ‘his own past’ as well as ‘his sense of historical direction.’¹²⁹ Tambu is suffering from the loss of her past and her sense of historical direction. Therefore, what she actually needs to salvage from her grandmother’s history lessons, apart from the misery and suffering of her homestead, is that her family’s chronicle did not begin with colonisation: “‘Your family did not always live here. [...] We lived up in Chipinge, where the soil is ripe and your great-grandfather was a rich man in the currency of those days, having many fat herd of cattle, large fields and four wives who worked hard to produce bountiful harvests. All this he could exchange for cloth and beads and axes and a gun, even a gun, from the traders.’”¹³⁰ This remembrance may act as a defence against further violence, as well as a source of solace and belonging in Zimbabwe. However, it could be argued that this remembrance conjures an idyllic past in which the position of women was fixed as wives and mothers within indigenous Shona culture. The inequalities and violence of colonial Rhodesia is still present in post-independence Zimbabwe. President Robert Mugabe has been heavily criticised for the corrupt nature of his government. Mugabe’s ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) government came to power in 1980. According to Peter Godwin, during the elections of 1980, Mugabe informed voters that he still kept his guerrillas in the field, and warned them that the war would continue if his party lost. Three years after independence Mugabe attacked the southern province of Metabeleland and killed twenty-thousand people, most of them supporters of Joshua Nkomo’s party, ZAPU (Zimbabwe African Patriotic Union).¹³¹ In 1990 Mugabe’s government faced strong opposition from the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Morgan Tsvangirai. In response to this challenge, Mugabe’s regime expropriated the white-owned farms and redistributed the confiscated lands, often to party

¹²⁸ JanMohamed, ‘Introduction’, p. 4.

¹²⁹ JanMohamed, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

¹³⁰ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 18.

¹³¹ See Peter Godwin, *The Fear: Robert Mugabe and the Martyrdom of Zimbabwe* (New York: Brown, 2011).

members and war veterans.¹³² It could be argued that Mugabe's Zimbabwe is not radically different from Dangarembga's fictional depiction of colonial Rhodesia. Dangarembga described colonial Rhodesia as a society where Africans cannot have equal access to quality education, and where whiteness is a visible marker of civilisation and economic and cultural development. The only difference is that in present day Zimbabwe it is Africans who are committing violent crimes against whites and other African ethnicities who dare to disagree with Mugabe. However, as Tony Benn has argued, the present criticism of Mugabe's regime by the west is duplicitous. Tony Benn trained as a pilot for Britain's World War II effort in colonial Rhodesia. According to Benn, 'I learnt to fly in what's now Zimbabwe. When I was there, there was no democracy at all. All the good land had been stolen and given to white farmers; no African had votes; it was a criminal offence for an African to have a skilled job and now we lecture Zimbabwe on democracy – total hypocrisy!'¹³³ Accordingly, it is problematic to focus on Mugabe's criminal acts without considering atrocities committed by the British during their rule. Daniel Compagnon argues that Mugabe has cunningly disguised his dictatorial character and never had any intention of establishing a democratic multiracial Zimbabwe after independence in 1980.¹³⁴ On the other hand, Dangarembga's argument that 'anything that is even mildly critical of white society in Zimbabwe today is seen as antidemocratic, prejudiced and racial'¹³⁵ illustrates the sheer difficulty of 'composing' a Zimbabwean identity. However, it is crucial for Tambu to recall the first encounter of the colonisers with her family, and to realise that this might help her to face and fight racism in post-independence Zimbabwe. This retrieval of Zimbabwean identity is only helpful if it does not take place within a framework of pre-colonial nostalgia.

¹³² Andrew Norman, *Robert Mugabe and the Betrayal of Zimbabwe* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2004).

¹³³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8133540.stm> [accesses 23rd April 2014].

¹³⁴ See Daniel Compagnon, *A Predictable Tragedy: Robert Mugabe and the Collapse of Zimbabwe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

¹³⁵ Tsitsi Dangarembga, 'Interview with the Author', in *Nervous Conditions* (Banbury: Ayeibia Clarke, 2004), p. 210.

Do Muslim Women Need Saving Again?:¹ Representations of Islam in Leila Aboulela's Fiction

The West believes that Islam oppresses women. But as a Muslim, descended from generations of Muslims, I have a different story to tell. It starts like this: You say, 'The sea is salty.' I say, 'But it is blue and full of fish.' I am not objective about Islam, and although I am considerably Westernized, I can never truly see it through Western eyes. I am in this religion. It is in me. And articulating the intimacy of faith and the experience of worship to a Western audience is a challenge and a discovery.²

The gender question should be re-examined, as the gender revolution was intended in Islam but never took off. It was aborted arguably for two reasons: a) mainstream Islam turned royalist from the Ummayyids [first ruling Islamic dynasty] onwards, and the harem developed and became more secluded as a more aristocratic version of Islam developed, and b) the doors of *ijtihad* [intellectual effort] closed and the gender revolution was thereby aborted.³

Islam and the West

Islam and the west have a very difficult relationship. This is partially due to the increasing politicisation of Islam in recent years and the concurrent development of stereotypes portraying Muslim women as victims oppressed by their religion. During the 1980s and 1990s, popular Hollywood movies portrayed Muslims exclusively as terrorists determined to conquer the United States.⁴ The lesson that movies like *Navy SEALs* (1990), *Iron Eagle* (1986), *Delta Force* (1986), *Invasion USA* (1985), *Death before Dishonor* (1987), *True Lies* (1994), *Rules of Engagement* (2000), and *Executive Decision* (1996) teach is that diplomacy is worthless in the face of an alien culture.⁵ According to Zohair Husain and David M. Rosenbaum, '[h]umiliating stereotypes of Muslims constructed for entertainment provide a catharsis through which Western paranoia and "Islamophobia" is expressed and

¹ My title echoes Leila Abu-Lughod, 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others: September 11, 2001', *American Anthropologist*, 104.3 (2002), pp. 783-790.

² Leila Aboulela, 'Restraint? Sure. Oppression? Hardly.', *The Washington post*, 22nd 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/20/AR2007072002147.html> [accessed 22nd January 2012].

³ Ali Mazrui, 'Islam and the End of History', *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 10.4 (1993), p. 533.

⁴ See Mir Zohair Hussain, *Global Islamic Politics* (New York & Munich: Longman, 2003).

⁵ See Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001).

partly relieved. The news media is the instigator of that paranoia and “Islamophobia.”⁶ Edward Said traces this attitude towards Muslims and Islam in detail in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994). According to Said, ‘[i]n the West, representations of the Arab world ever since the 1976 War have been crude, reductionist, coarsely racist, as much critical literature in Europe and the United States has ascertained and verified.’⁷ He further explained that the media conveyed the impression that ‘Arabs only understand force; brutality and violence are part of Arab civilization; Islam is an intolerant, segregationist, “medieval”, fanatic, cruel, anti-woman religion.’⁸ According to Said:

Islam is *rarely* studied, *rarely* researched, and *rarely* known. [...] Clichés about how Muslims (or Mohammedans, as they are still sometimes called) behave are bandied about with a nonchalance no one would risk in talking about blacks or Jews. At best, the Muslim is a ‘native informant’ for the Orientalist. Secretly, however, he remains a despised heretic who for his sins must additionally endure the entirely thankless position of being known – negatively, that is – as an anti-Zionist.⁹

Said further argued that for some observers, ‘Islam is a politics and a religion; to others it is a style of being; to others it is “distinguishable from Muslim society”’; to still others it is a mysteriously known essence; to all the authors Islam is a remote, tensionless thing, without much to teach us about the complexities of today’s Muslims.’¹⁰

⁶ Zohair Husain, David M. Rosenbaum, ‘Perceiving Islam: The Causes and Consequences of Islamophobia in the Western Media’, in *Religious Fundamentalism in the Contemporary World: Critical Social and Political Issues*, ed. Saha C. Santosh (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), p. 183.

⁷ Edward Said, ‘Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories’, in *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 42.

⁸ Said, ‘Freedom from Domination in the Future’, p. 357.

⁹ Edward Said, ‘Orientalism Now’, in *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 300-301.

¹⁰ Said, ‘Orientalism Now’, p. 305.

Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* (2004) is an atheist work,¹¹ where he argues that all religions are evil, and '[w]ords like "God" and "Allah" must go the way of "Apollo" and "Baal."' ¹² However, rather than focusing on every religion, Islam becomes his main focus, and he develops an unhistorical and de-contextualised reading of the *Quran*. Harris supports America's military invasions of Muslim countries, arguing that 'we cannot wait for the weapons of mass destruction to dribble into the hands of fanatics.'¹³ Harris is convinced that the Muslim world is not mature enough to handle democracy; therefore what is needed is gentle dictatorship, imposed on Islamic states by the west.¹⁴ He is also willing to consider the option of a pre-emptive nuclear strike against a weaponised Islamic state: 'it may be the only course of action available to us, given what Islamists believe.'¹⁵ *The Second Plane*, by Martin Amis, also reveals a reductive understanding of Islam and the Muslim world, and explains current upheavals in that world as the outcome of male sexual frustration.¹⁶ Amis focuses on Islam as the supposed 'last sanctum of male power,'¹⁷ ignoring the western injustices against Islam: European colonisation of Muslim lands; America's interference in the Middle East, and its support for the Arab dictators (in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, America was very reluctant to abandon its support for the dictatorial president, Hosni Mubarak, who ruled Egypt for three decades); America's support for the autocratic rule of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran against the wishes of the people of Iran; and America's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. According to Amis,

¹¹ Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate explained that in the early years of the third Christian millennium, western civilization witnessed the birth of a curious cult calling itself the 'New Atheism'. It began with the appearance of four best-selling polemics against religion: Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* (2004), Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2006), Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* (2006), and Christopher Hitchens's *God is Not Great* (2007). Bradley and Tate define the new atheist novel as 'disturbing aesthetic-political dogmatism – about science, about reason, about religion and, in many cases, about Islam.' See Arthur Bradley, Andrew Tate, *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 10.

¹² Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 14.

¹³ Harris, 'The Problem with Islam', in *The End of Faith*, p. 151.

¹⁴ Harris, 'The Problem with Islam', p. 151.

¹⁵ Harris, 'The Problem with Islam', p. 129.

¹⁶ See Martin Amis, *The Second Plane: September 11: 2002-2007* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), pp. 47, 60, 67, 89.

¹⁷ Amis, 'Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind', in *The Second Plane*, p. 89.

the roots of religious aggression lie in male hormones, and therefore in *The Second Plane*, the 9/11 attacks are referred to as ‘an Islamist brand of Viagra.’¹⁸ In an interview with *The Times*, Amis says: ‘There is a definite urge – don’t you have it? – to say, “The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.”’¹⁹ Elsewhere, Amis remarks, ‘[t]he stout self-sufficiency or, if you prefer, the extreme incuriosity of Islamic culture has been much remarked.’²⁰ According to Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate, Amis’s disparagement of 1.5 billion Muslims as wanting in curiosity is both disturbing and ignorant.²¹

The western construction of Malala Yousafzai’s narrative reflects the west’s proclaimed inherent moral superiority over Muslim countries. Malala Yousafzai is a sixteen-year-old Pakistani girl, who was shot in head by Taliban gunman on October 9, 2012. The reason behind this assassination attempt was Malala’s campaign for girls’ education, especially in her hometown of Swat valley in the northwest Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. After the shooting, Malala was brought to UK for her treatment, and finally recovered from her wounds. Western media has given Malala’s case wide coverage; Hollywood actress Angelina Jolie has launched a charity with Malala to fund girls’ education;²² and former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has celebrated her courage.²³ Following Malala’s recent meeting with Barack Obama’s family, the White House said that the ‘US celebrated Malala’s courage and determination to promote girls’ right to attend school.’²⁴ On 10th October 2013, Malala was awarded the EU’s Sakharov Human Rights Prize, and she was also nominated for the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize.²⁵ All these are positive steps for making education available for children in the third world. I

¹⁸ Arthur Bradley, Andrew Tate, ‘Martin Amis and the War for Cliché’, in *The New Atheist Novel*, p. 43.

¹⁹ Martin Amis, ‘The Voice of Experience’, *The Times*, 9 September 2006, http://www.martinamisweb.com/documents/voice_of_experience.pdf [accessed 11th September 2012].

²⁰ Amis, ‘Terror and Boredom’, p. 79.

²¹ Arthur Bradley, Andrew Tate, ‘Introduction: The New Atheist Novel’, in *The New Atheist Novel*, p. 14.

²² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-22036775> [accessed 16th October 2013].

²³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-23352483> [accessed 16th October 2013].

²⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-24504652> [accessed 16th October 2013].

²⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-24504652> [accessed 16th October 2013].

must state here that I support Malala's cause, admire her courage, and condemn her attackers. However, this whole situation becomes problematic, when the west once again starts playing the role of the saviour. In the narrative established in the British and American press coverage of Malala's experiences, the west saved a Muslim Pakistani girl from the wretched Taliban, thus signifying that America's and Britain's decision to invade Afghanistan and Iraq was morally correct. However, throughout the coverage of Malala's recovery, neither the American nor British governments have made any comment on drone attacks in Pakistan which are killing children and destroying their schools. The hypocrisy of presenting the west as Muslim girls' saviour becomes particularly apparent when they are simultaneously destroying schools through their drone attacks in Pakistan and supporting Malala for espousing education. This hypocrisy becomes more ferocious when we realise that a fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl Abeer Qasim,²⁶ who was gang-raped by five US soldiers on 12th March 2006, and then murdered did not get any media coverage in the west, and neither Barack Obama nor Gordon Brown made any comment on that crime. Essentially, the west is exploiting Malala Yousafzai to justify their immoral acts of invasion and occupation.

However, Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* (1819) tried to create an intercultural poetic dialogue between west and Islam nearly two hundred years ago.²⁷ Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* is the first western poetical response to medieval Persian Poet Hafiz' *Divan*. Katharina Mommsen notes that:

[t]he combination of the two [East and West] also indicated that this *Divan* is not simply either Western or Eastern. It is in principle equidistant from both, a new amalgam from their combination. With very few exceptions the poems are not

²⁶ http://www.expose-the-war-profiteers.org/DOD/iraq_II/mahmudiya.htm [accessed 16th October 2013].

²⁷ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *West-Eastern Divan* was published in 1819. *Notes and Essays*, a book-length prose supplement to the lyrical *Divan* has appeared in English for the first time in 2010. For this see Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Marin Bidney, and Peter Anton Arnim, *West-East Divan: The Poems, with "Notes and Essays": Goethe's Intercultural Dialogues* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

translations of Oriental poetry. Nor was Goethe trying to imitate such poetry. His *Divan* results from an assimilation which could only stem from an inward affinity, as if the alien poetry was born again in the *West-Eastern Divan*. Underlying all is Goethe's hope, as he felt it, to restore through poetry the unity of two separated hemispheres of Orient and Occident.²⁸

Throughout his work, Goethe does not show a patronising attitude towards the Orient, but rather encourages his reader to appreciate 'other' cultures without supercilious regard:

To God belongs the Orient,
To God belongs the Occident,
The Northern and the Southern,
Resting, Tranquil, in His hands.²⁹

Goethe continually emphasises throughout *Notes and Essays* the importance of intercultural dialogue between traditions. 'Traditions' in *Notes and Essays* introduces seven supreme masters of medieval verse – Firdusi, Anvari, Nizami, Rumi, Saadi, Hafiz, and Jami. Goethe described Saadi as 'driven out into the wide world, swamped with boundless particulars of empirical reality. But he knows how to gain something from all of it. He feels the need for composure, convincing himself that it is his duty to teach, and thus he has become fruitful and beneficial for us of the West.'³⁰ Goethe advocates and explores a critical yet sympathetic consciousness which is able to gauge different traditions, cultures and religions; because this 'sort of mind creates the strangest relationships, connecting what is incompatible, but in such a way that a secret ethical thread weaves through, lending the whole a certain unity.'³¹ As Said also suggested that '[i]t is more rewarding [...] to

²⁸ Katharina Mommsen, 'Introduction', in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, John Whaley, *Poems of the West and East: West-Eastern Divan = West-Östlicher Divan: Bi-Lingual Edition of the Complete Poems*, trans. John Whaley (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1998), pp. viii-xi.

²⁹ Goethe, 'Talismans', in *West-East Divan*, p. 5.

³⁰ Goethe, 'Overview', in *Notes and Essays*, p. 205.

³¹ Goethe, 'Comparison', in *Notes and Essays*, p. 224.

think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterating how “our” culture or country is number one.’³² Said’s ‘contrapuntal’ thinking and Goethe’s ‘intercultural poetic dialogue’ will help a western audience to understand the Muslim world in Aboulela’s work.

Sufi Interpretations of Islam

According to Kenneth W. Harrow, ‘Islam has conventionally been reduced to the notion of a predetermined monolith.’³³ Harrow illustrates how generalised characterisations of Islam have succeeded in converting distinct groups of people into one undifferentiated entity, ‘Muslims.’³⁴ This reductive and simplified designation of Islam becomes very complicated in the post-9/11 western world, in which Islam is often considered as a violent political movement devoid of the faith informing Abrahamic religions. Elizabeth Poole argues that despite some differences, there is ‘a negative formulation of Muslims throughout the British press’ with certain uniformities: first, that ‘the main significance and focus on Islam is global’, so that ‘[i]mages of Islam, then, in people’s minds [would] be predominantly “foreign”’, and secondly, that there is ‘a consistent reference to world events in the articles on British Islam, suggesting that Muslims are immutably linked together.’³⁵ Nigerian theorist and activist Ayesha Imam argues that Islam and Muslim are not interchangeable.³⁶ This differentiation, according to Imam, will help in avoiding ‘essentializing Islam as an ahistorical, disembodied ideal which is more or less imperfectly actualised in this or that community.’³⁷ Aboulela’s texts encourage thinking about Muslim communities not as one

³² Said, ‘Freedom from Domination in the Future’, in *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 408.

³³ Kenneth W. Harrow, ‘Introduction: Islam(s) in African Literature’, in *Faces of Islam in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1991), p. 3.

³⁴ Harrow, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

³⁵ Elizabeth Poole, ‘Media Representation and British Muslims’, <http://www.albab.com/media/articles/poole0005.htm>, [accessed 25th June 2013].

³⁶ Ayesha Imam, ‘The Muslim Religious Right (“Fundamentalists”) and Sexuality’, *Women Living Under Muslim Laws Dossier*, 17 (2000), pp. 7-25; see also Farida Shaheed, ‘Controlled or Autonomous: Identity and the Experience of the Network, Women Living Under Muslim Laws’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 19.4 (1994), pp. 997-1019.

³⁷ Imam, ‘The Muslim Religious Right (“Fundamentalists”) and Sexuality’, p. 7.

single homogeneous structure; but rather, as a plurality of cultures, each with its own particular set of traditions, which are not necessarily acceptable in another Muslim community. Islam has accommodated the culture and traditions of different regions upon arrival, and therefore the Islam of the south Asian communities is different from that of the Arab communities. Therefore, it will be useful if we think about Islam and Muslim in plural terms. Muslim societies are diverse; however they have two very important common attributes: *Quran* and *hadith*.³⁸ As the words of Allah, *Quran* cannot be questioned. However, the interpretations of the *Quranic* message have always been debatable, and sometimes even controversial due to the direct interference of the state. Likewise, there are certain *hadiths*, whose reliability has always been the source of contention. There are also various schools of *sharia* (officially organised bodies of Muslim laws which frequently combine law and theology) which further indicate that Islam is not a monolith and there are varied ways of understanding and practising Islam. The *Sunni* and *Shi'a*, two major sects in Islam provide different interpretations of *Quran*, *hadith* and Islamic laws. There are also further sub-divisions within these two major sects.³⁹ In the words of Jacques Derrida '[t]here are many Islams.'⁴⁰ I argue that the kind of Islam Aboulela depicts in her work is *Sufi*.⁴¹

Sufism is often described as the 'inner path (*tariqa*)' which enables the deeper understanding of the 'inner dimensions of reality' that will 'facilitate a more intimate

³⁸ The reliable and trustworthy record of the Prophet Muhammad's speech and actions, narrated by those who were his contemporaries and passed onto others in a traceable line of transmission. See Saba Mahmood, 'Topography of the Piety Movement', in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 41; see also Leila Ahmed, 'Women and the Rise of Islam', in *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of Modern Debate* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 46.

³⁹ See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of Modern Debate* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992); and Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, Mustapha Cherif, 'East-West: Unity and Differences', in *Islam and the West: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 39.

⁴¹ Personal communication from the author, Leila Aboulela, 3rd December 2013.

relationship with God and greater submission to the divine will.’⁴² The *Sufi* Islam is of specific interest in the context of Aboulela’s work, as it works against the patriarchal definitions of Islam. In *Sufism* the gender differences are immaterial as ‘both men and women are charged with mutually overseeing one another; they are not pitted against or above one another.’⁴³ This idea of equality is also present in the Quran, which states:

The Believers, men and women
are protecting friends of one another;
They enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil;
they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity
and obey God and the Apostle.
On them God will pour mercy,
for God is exalted in power, Wise.
God has promised believers, men and women,
Gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein,
And beautiful mansions in gardens of everlasting bliss,
But the greatest bliss is the good pleasure of God.
That is supreme felicity.⁴⁴

Despite such clear indications of equality, orthodox interpretations deny women active participation in both spiritual and physical matters. Ibn al-Arabi, an influential Muslim Sufi thinker, also emphasises the complementarity of the sexes. He named Adam as the first female, because Eve was born from his side, and defined Mary as the second Adam, because she produced Jesus.⁴⁵ According to Ibn al-Arabi, God draws forth from Adam, ‘a being in his own image, called woman, and because she appears to him in his own image,

⁴² Sadiyya Shaikh, ‘Introduction: Tales of Contentment’, in *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), p. 10.

⁴³ Shaikh, ‘Ibn Arabi and Islamic Feminism’, in *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, p. 215.

⁴⁴ *Al Quran*, 9. 71-72.

⁴⁵ Ibn al-Arabi, ‘Introduction’, in *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 35.

the man feels a deep longing for her, as something which yearns for itself.' Ibn al-Arabi also interprets the creative 'Breath of Mercy, a component of the Godhead itself, as feminine.'⁴⁶ *Sufism* does not consider women as naive and inferior; rather, it counts women among its most important contributors, and also as spiritual leaders, for example Rabia al-Adawiyya.⁴⁷ The female protagonists of Aboulela's fictions are decisive and resourceful figures who confront and process myriad social and emotional challenges by relying on their inner sharia or faith. Aboulela is fascinated by, and seeks to address the 'inner path (*tariqa*)' of her characters, which helps them to make sense of their lives in unfamiliar environments.

Female Characters in Aboulela's Fiction

Leila Aboulela's first novel, *The Translator* (1999), is a love story set in Aberdeen.

Sammar, a Sudanese translator, and Rae Isles, a Scottish lecturer in Postcolonial Politics at Aberdeen University, are colleagues, and gradually develop strong feelings for each other. Sammar is recently widowed after losing her husband Tarig in a car accident. Her son Amir lives in Sudan with Sammar's mother-in-law, Mahasen, and Sammar herself lives a lonely existence in a modest rented room in Aberdeen. Her friendship with Rae begins over the telephone during Christmas holidays. However, there is a significant obstacle to their relationship, considering Rae is not a Muslim and is not ready to convert in order to marry Sammar. After having an argument with Rae over his lack of faith, she decides to return to Sudan to her family. Several months later, Rae follows her there, after saying the *shahadah* (declaration of faith), and converting to Islam. At the end of the novel, both are planning their marriage and a trip to Egypt, before they return to Aberdeen.

⁴⁶ Arabi, 'The Wisdom of Singularity in the Word of Muhammad', in *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 274.

⁴⁷ See Sadiyya Shaikh, 'Craving Completion: Sufism, Subjectivity, Gender Before Ibn Arabi', 'Witnessing God in Women: A Different Story of Creation', 'Ibn Arabi and Islamic Feminism', in *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, pp. 35-61, 173-202, 203-229; and Leila Ahmed, 'Elaboration of the Founding Discourses', in *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 96.

Aboulela's second novel, *Minaret* (2005), is set in Khartoum and London. Both love and Islam have a very prominent presence in this work. Aboulela tells the story of her central character Najwa, through her love affairs, and her gradually-developing faith in Islam. Najwa's story begins in Khartoum in 1984, where – as the daughter of a Sudanese minister – she lives extravagantly. She falls in love with a fellow student, Anwar, a radical socialist, who hates everything connected with Islam. The drastic change in Najwa's life follows a coup in Sudan, which leads to her father's arrest and ensuing execution; the rest of the family flee to London. There, Najwa's brother Omar becomes a drug addict, and receives a long prison sentence after stabbing a policeman during his arrest; her mother dies following a long illness; and Najwa ends up as a domestic servant for a wealthy Arab family in London. During this period, another coup exiles Anwar to London, and Najwa begins a sexual affair with him. However, she realises that Anwar has no intention of conducting a serious relationship with her, and finally finds the strength to leave him through her association with a group of women at the Regent's Park mosque. Najwa's engagement with her faith happens against the backdrop of intense post-9/11 Islamophobia, and she is referred to as 'Muslim scum'⁴⁸ when wearing her veil. In her position as a nanny for Mai, Lamy's daughter, she spends time with her employer's younger brother, Tamer, and observes the discomfort with which people view his beard and his Arab identity. Both Tamer and Najwa develop an attachment based on their religious devotion, and slowly begin to fall in love. However, their relationship ends due to age and class differences, and by the end of the novel Najwa is planning to travel to Mecca.

Aboulela's third novel, *Lyrics Alley* (2010), is set in 1950s Sudan amid the excitement and enthusiasm of independence from Britain and Egypt. The core narrative is inspired by the life of Aboulela's father's cousin, the poet Hassan Awad Aboulela. He

⁴⁸ Leila Aboulela, *Minaret* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 81.

became famous in the 1950s, when his poetry was turned into popular songs, and performed by the leading Sudanese singers of the time: Ahmed Al Mustafa and Sayyid Khalifa.⁴⁹ In the novel *Aboulela* fictionalised Hassan as Nur, a poet and the second son of Mahmoud Abuzeid by his first wife, Hajjah Waheeba. Abuzeid is also married to an Egyptian woman, Nabilah, with whom he has two more children, a boy named Farouk and a girl named Ferial. Abuzeid runs a business empire with his brother Idris, whose middle daughter Fatma is married to Nassir, Mahmoud's elder son. Idris's youngest daughter, Soraya, is betrothed to Nur. Mahmoud's hope for the further expansion of the Abuzeid dynasty lies in his brilliant son Nur. He sends him to a British boarding school in Egypt, and plans to send him to a university in England. However, an accident paralyses Nur, shattering his hopes of going to England, and consequently university and marriage. He slowly and gradually finds peace in poetry, and fights the societal and parental pressures against his dream of becoming a poet.

Islam, which has become a highly politicised religion in the post-9/11 world of increasing polarisation, plays a vital role in these three literary narratives by Aboulela. Nadia Butt, in her essay 'Negotiating Untranslatability and Islam in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*', argues that Sammar's fixation with religion impedes her independence and freedom. According to Butt, Sammar's desire to become a third wife to an old man reflects the hold of Islam on her, as she 'firmly believes that adherence to Islamic laws such as polygamy [...] is the only yardstick by which to judge a man's calibre.'⁵⁰ Polygamy in Africa existed before the arrival of Islam. The reason polygamy comes under harsh scrutiny in western discourse has a long and complex colonial history. During colonial times in Africa, indigenous traditions and customs were denigrated and discarded by the

⁴⁹ <http://www.leila-aboulela.com/books/lyrics-alley/inspiration/>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVPf-nsOhh4>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TsUruSwnH0>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtrFS7kEKKk&feature=related> [accessed 12th September 2013].

⁵⁰ Nadia Butt, 'Negotiating Untranslatability and Islam in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*', in *Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa*, ed. Elisabeth Bekers, Sissy Helf, and Daniela Merolla (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 171-172.

colonial powers.⁵¹ One of the ancient traditions in Africa is *polygamy*. Apart from polygamy, there are various other forms of marriage in Africa, including *polyandry*, *sororate* (when a man marries his wife's sister), *levirate* (in which a man inherits his dead brother's wife), and *surrogacy* (a marriage between two women, but not a homosexual arrangement). When a man with no male heir dies, one of his daughters inherits the estate. In this situation, the female heir is not allowed to move out of the female compound or enter into sexual relations with a man. However, she must try to have children in order to keep the family name alive. To achieve this, the female heir marries one or more women (generally younger), with the aim of having children who will carry the name of the deceased male household. The younger woman considers the female heir as her husband, but is socially permitted to engage in sexual relations with a man in order to conceive. The heir in turn is required to fulfil all the duties of the husband, for example, the payment of the bride price, and provisions of financial support for the young wife.⁵² This concept of family differs sharply from the western concept of family. According to Ali Mazrui, the African family is a mystery to many non-Africans, because it has demonstrated remarkable strength by surviving centuries of colonial violence.⁵³ Therefore to see Sammar's desire to become a part of polygamous family as backward and inhibited will be a reductive reading of African culture and customs.⁵⁴

For Butt, Rae's conversion also shows Aboulela's preoccupation with Islam:

Since the idea of 'rescuing' Rae by transferring him into the ultimate truth of Islam is so central not only to Sammar's personal life story, but also to the overall project

⁵¹ See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 1990); and Abdul R. JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983).

⁵² See Ambe J. Njoh, *Tradition, Culture and Development in Africa: Historical Lessons for Modern Development Planning* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

⁵³ Ali Mazrui, cited in Ambe J. Njoh, 'Traditional African Family', in *Tradition, Culture and Development in Africa*, p. 51.

⁵⁴ See Jay Spaulding, 'An Historical Context for the Study of Islam in Eastern Africa', in *Faces of Islam in African Literature*, pp. 23-37.

of Aboulela's novel, it can hardly come as a surprise that the *Muslim News* described *The Translator* as 'the first halal novel written in English' – as opposed to countless '*haram* novels' that do not celebrate the triumph of Islam and the defeat of secularism as a disobedience to Allah and His Prophet.⁵⁵

Yet despite this 'halal novelist' tag, the portrayal of Islam in *Minaret* is not ideal. Najwa, the protagonist in *Minaret*, is having sex with her Sudanese boyfriend Anwar, and enjoying it. Aboulela's work is showing the complexity of today's Muslims, and she is depicting this without laying any blame upon religion, seeing it rather as a balm, a source of relief in the lives of the faithful. She is telling stories from the places where Islam has a significant position. According to Robin Yassin-Kassab, the label 'Muslim Writer like any other is limiting if it's used as a box, liberating if we use it as a springboard [...] a springboard to tell stories that no one has told before, in our words, interpreting life in our own way.'⁵⁶ Aboulela's work aims to de-mythologise Islamic theology, *sharia*, and rituals. As she is more concerned with the inner faith, rather than with any imposed orthodox version of Islam; much of her work is devoted to the description of various Islamic rituals, and of how they strengthen the inner faith of her characters and enable them to face life in a predominantly secular environment. When in *The Translator*, Sammar breaks her fast with dates and water at sunset during Ramadan, she 'felt herself to be simple, someone with a simple need, easily fulfilled, easily granted. The dates and the water made her heart feel big, with no hankering or tanginess or grief.'⁵⁷ At another point, upon entering a makeshift mosque on campus, 'she felt eerily alone in the spacious room with its high ceiling,'⁵⁸ but as soon as she recites the first verses of her prayers, 'the certainty of the words brought unexpected tears, something deeper than happiness, all the splinters inside her coming

⁵⁵ Butt, 'Negotiating Untranslatability and Islam in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*', p. 177.

⁵⁶ Robin Yassin-Kassab cited in Leila Aboulela, 'Opinion: You Gotta have Faith', *Book Brunch*, 23rd December 2010. http://www.bookbrunch.co.uk/bbrunch/article_free.asp?pid=opinion_you_gotta_have_faith [accessed 26th November 2013].

⁵⁷ Leila Aboulela, *The Translator* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2008), p. 36.

⁵⁸ Aboulela, *The Translator*, p. 72.

together.⁵⁹ Prayer and fasting are presented as integral parts of a process which enables the individual to regain his or her inner sense of peace and equilibrium. Aboulela sees Islamic rituals as personal experiences which need to be experienced without any external enforcement in order to comprehend Islam as a faith; on this view, imposed Islam not only leads to the orthodox practice of religion, but also causes friction among various Muslim communities.

According to Robin Yassin-Kassab, the encouraging and optimistic role of faith is portrayed by Badr in *Lyrics Alley*.⁶⁰ Badr is a teacher, living in impoverished conditions with his family, and wants to move into better accommodation. Seeking this, he goes to Mahmud Bey's office to request the lease of a flat in a new building which is being constructed. However, he is badly treated, and eventually asked to leave when an important guest arrives: Mr Harrison, the manager of Barclays Bank. According to Yassin-Kassab, this embarrassing and demeaning experience can easily become a cause of exasperation, but 'by spiritualising his struggles the teacher becomes the novel's most positive figure, the sort who prays in the presence of angels':⁶¹

Afterwards, he wanted to ask men who had prayed with him if they, too, had noticed what he had noticed, if they, too, had experienced that thinning of the barriers. He wanted to confirm that this was not an ordinary maghrib prayer, but one in which one or more of Allah's powerful servants had participated. He was almost certain that inhuman creatures, who could neither be seen nor touched, had prayed too.⁶²

This depiction of one of the faithful offering his prayer is very different from the portrayal of Muslims in the western world, where mosque and a practising Muslim both are

⁵⁹ Aboulela, *The Translator*, p. 72.

⁶⁰ Robin Yassin-Kassab, 'Review', *Wasafiri*, 4 May 2011, http://www.wasafiri.org/pages/news_01/news_item.asp?News_01ID=226, [accessed 20th April 2012].

⁶¹ Yassin-Kassab, 'Review', *Wasafiri*.

⁶² Leila Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2010), p. 59.

doubtful, and are often bound up with the rhetoric of fundamentalism or terrorism. The western (Anglo-American) news media usually depict Muslims offering their prayers in the mosque when they are offering their *Sajda*, which is a prostrate position, which makes them look more alien, more like incomprehensible ‘others.’ Explaining the current media bias against Islam and Muslims, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin say: ‘As in so much of the fiction and film about contemporary terrorism, the Americans, and to a lesser extent the British, are *psychologised* and the Muslims are, in contrast, *pathologized*; they and their religious, social, and political systems are seen as inherently predisposed to violence, be it terrorism or brutal law enforcement.’⁶³

Aboulela’s fiction is a riposte to this stereotyping of Muslims in the western media. The emphasis on religion which brings harmony and tranquillity in Aboulela’s characters is present in all of her works. The mosque is very important for both Najwa and Sammar, as it is there that they gain strength from their faith without being suffocated by a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. Regent’s Park mosque helps Najwa in London both financially and spiritually. It is through the mosque that she gets her job as Lamya’s daughter’s babysitter and begins her journey towards spirituality. Aboulela’s female characters are claiming their place in mosques which has been denied to them not by Islam but by orthodox interpretations of Islam, especially Wahhabis.⁶⁴ Women of the first Muslim community not only attended mosque, but were also given the right to directly address the Prophet Muhammad and ask him questions. The most significant question women asked Muhammad about the *Quran* was why it did not address women, while they

⁶³ Peter Morey, Amina Yaqin, ‘Performing Beyond the Frame: Gender, Comedy, and Subversion’, in *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 156.

⁶⁴ Followers of Abd-al Wahab (1703-1792), are the most conservative group of Islam, and are found today mainly in Saudi Arabia.

also accepted Allah and his prophet.⁶⁵ This question resulted in the revelation of the Quranic verse addressing both men and women:

For Muslim men and women,
 For believing men and women,
 For devout men and women,
 For true men and women,
 For men and women who are
 Patient and constant, for men
 And women who humble themselves,
 For men and women who give
 In charity, for men and women
 Who fast (and deny themselves),
 For men and women who
 Guard their chastity, and
 For men and women who
 Engage much in God's praise,
 For them God has prepared
 Forgiveness and a great reward.⁶⁶

This response indicates that Islam promotes equality between men and women, and also shows Muhammad's willingness to listen to women's complaints and to immediately address them. Moreover, it demonstrates women's dynamic and vigorous participations in

⁶⁵ Nabia Abbott, 'Women in Early Islam', in *Studies of Arabic Literary Papyri: Language and Literature*, 3 vols (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974), pp. 110-111; see also Leila Ahmed, 'The Transitional Age', in *Women and Gender in Islam*, pp. 64-78.

⁶⁶ *Al Quran*, 35. 35

mosques during the time of Muhammad. However, this all changed in Umer's reign (634-44) when he forbade women to attend their prayers at mosque.⁶⁷

Aboulela's characters are acutely aware of the importance of the mosque in their spiritual lives, as Sammar says: 'There was more reward praying in a group than praying alone. When she prayed with others, she found it easier to concentrate, her heart held steady by those who had faith like her.'⁶⁸ And in this spiritual journey mosques help Aboulela's female characters. However, this place has been forbidden to women because in orthodox interpretation women cannot achieve the level of spirituality which men do, they cannot have any sort of engagement with politics and as a result remain secluded members of Muslim society. Leila Ahmed argues that a revolutionary understanding of Islam is possible through *Sufi* and *Qarmati* thought.⁶⁹ Through the reclamation of this emancipatory tradition of justice and equity, Ahmed argues, 'Muslim women would not be compelled to make the intolerable choice between religious belief and their own autonomy and self-affirmation.'⁷⁰ The egalitarianism inherent in what Leila Ahmed calls 'the ethical voice of Islam' is one reason 'Muslim women frequently insist, often inexplicably to non-Muslims, that Islam is not sexist. They hear and read in its sacred text, justly and legitimately, a different message from that heard by the makers and enforcers of orthodox androcentric Islam.'⁷¹

The Politics of the Veil

The veil is a powerful symbol, and in the existing post-9/11 environment it would be naive to generalise about the phenomenon of veiling. It is important to see veiling in historical context, in order to understand it as an emblem (in the west) of Muslim women's supposed oppression. The veil carries different connotations in different Muslim cultures, and

⁶⁷ See Leila Ahmed, 'Women and the Rise of Islam', in *Women and Gender in Islam*, pp. 41-64.

⁶⁸ Aboulela, *The Translator*, p. 72.

⁶⁹ See Leila Ahmed, 'Women and the Advent of Islam', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 11 (1986), pp. 665-691.

⁷⁰ Ahmed, 'Women and the Advent of Islam', p. 679.

⁷¹ Ahmed, 'The Transitional Age', in *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 66.

therefore the phenomenon of veiling cannot be reduced a single cultural interpretation. According to Daphne Grace, veiling can be an index of ‘class identity, gender inequality and western opposition’, however it is important to establish who is explaining ‘the phenomenon of veiling, for whom and to what end.’⁷² The question of who is speaking is crucial, as many Muslim women underline the complexity of veiling by giving varied reasons for using it. Aziza al-Hibri asks, ‘[w]hy is it oppressive to wear a head scarf but liberating to wear a mini-skirt.’⁷³ In Oman, where the veil signifies high class, Unni Wikan argues it is ‘as much a symbol of male oppression as Western women wearing a blouse.’⁷⁴ Marnia Lazreg argues that a woman ‘who takes up the veil accepts her essentialized difference from men (valued negatively) and gives it credence. Furthermore, she enfolds herself in a gamut of behaviour stemming from the unacknowledged self-deception that veiling entails.’⁷⁵ The veil is no longer a mere piece of cloth in Muslim women’s attire; rather, it has become a precarious political issue. Fadwa El Guindi has argued that ‘a reaffirmation of tradition and culture might again be played out in the near future through the idiom and politics of the veil.’⁷⁶ The American and British political rhetoric used to justify the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan confirmed El Guindi’s prediction. Lila Abu-Lughod asked why in this so-called war on terrorism:

knowing about the ‘culture’ of region, and particularly its religious beliefs and treatment of women, was more urgent than exploring the history of the development of repressive regimes in the region and the U.S. role in this history. [...]

Instead of political and historical explanations, experts were being asked to

⁷² Daphne Grace, ‘Background to the Veil: History, Theory and Culture’, in *The Woman in the Muslim Mask: Veiling and Identity in Postcolonial Literature* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), p. 10.

⁷³ Azizah Y. Al-Hibri, ‘Is Western Patriarchal Feminism Good for Third World/Minority Women’, in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, ed. S. M. Okin (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 46.

⁷⁴ Unni Wikan, ‘The Burqa Facial Mask’, in *Behind the Veil in Arabia: Women in Oman* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), p. 106.

⁷⁵ Marnia Lazreg, ‘Letter Five: Why Women Should Not Wear the Veil’, in *Questioning the Veil: Open Letters to Muslim Women* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 107.

⁷⁶ Fadwa El Guindi, ‘Veiling and Feminism’, in *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, Resistance* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), pp. 184-185.

give religio-cultural ones. Instead of questioning that might lead to the exploration of the global interconnections, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres – recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burqas.⁷⁷

Laura Bush's November 17, 2001 speech used the position of women to justify the invasion of Afghanistan. As Laura Bush said, '[b]ecause of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.'⁷⁸ In a confrontation often portrayed as a clash of civilisations, 'Islam is seen as a triple threat: political, civilizational, and demographic.'⁷⁹ Margaret Thatcher described Islamic extremism as the new bolshevism, observing that 'like Communism, it requires an all-embracing long-term strategy to defeat it.'⁸⁰ The veil plays a central role in this process of othering Islam. In the propagation of American democracy in the Muslim countries, the veil is also appropriated as a signifier of Muslim women's repression. As the British journalist Polly Toynbee wrote that 'the burka was the battle flag [...] [and] a shorthand moral justification'⁸¹ for invading Afghanistan.

The justification of protecting women as a pretext for invading other countries has precedents in colonial history. Marnia Lazreg described how French colonialism enlisted women to its cause in Algeria. She writes:

⁷⁷ Abu-Lughod, 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?', p. 784.

⁷⁸ Laura Bush, *The Washington Post Online*, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext_111701.html, [accessed 23rd January 2012].

⁷⁹ See J. L. Esposito, 'Islam and Civil Society' in *Modernising Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in Europe and the Middle East*, ed. J. L. Esposito and François Burgat (London: Hurst, 2003), p. 89.

⁸⁰ Margaret Thatcher, *Guardian*, 12 February, 2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/feb/12/afghanistan.politics> [accessed 22nd January 2013].

⁸¹ Polly Toynbee, 'Was it Worth It?', *Guardian*, 13 November, 2002, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/13/afghanistan.comment> [accessed 22nd January 2013].

Perhaps the most spectacular example of the colonial appropriation of women's voices, and the silencing of those among them who had begun to take women revolutionaries [...] as role models by not donning the veil, was the event of May 16, 1958 [just four years before Algeria finally gained its independence from France after a long bloody struggle and 130 years of French control]. One day a demonstration was organized by rebellious French generals in Algeria to show their determination to keep Algeria French. To give the government of France evidence that Algerians were in agreement with them, the generals had a few thousand native men bused in from nearby villages, along with a few women who were solemnly unveiled by French women. [...] Rounding up Algerians and bringing them to demonstrations of loyalty to France was not in itself an unusual act during the colonial era. But to unveil women at a well-choreographed ceremony added to the event a symbolic dimension that dramatized the one constant feature of the Algerian occupation by France: its obsession with women.⁸²

Fanon considered Algerian women's refusal to unveil themselves as an act of resistance against occupation. For Fanon '[t]his woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonisers. There is no reciprocity. She does not yield herself, does not give herself, does not offer herself.'⁸³ The veil is not a hindrance in her activities for the revolution. Among the tasks assigned to the Algerian woman is 'the bearing of messages, of complicated verbal orders learned by heart, sometimes despite complete absence of schooling. But she is also called upon to stand watch, for an hour and often more, before a house where district leaders are conferring.'⁸⁴ But when they realised that their revolution needed them to unveil themselves they did it, and this decision to unveil was again not connected with

⁸² Marnia Lazreg, 'Nationalism, Decolonization and Gender', in *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 135-136.

⁸³ Frantz Fanon, 'Algeria Unveiled', in *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 44.

⁸⁴ Fanon, 'Algeria Unveiled', p. 53.

religion, but rather another war strategy against colonisers. For Algerian women both veiling and unveiling were not associated with their identity as Muslims or in any case with their modesties. Veiling is an Algerian tradition which women were exploiting according to their needs. For Fanon:

There is thus a historic dynamism of the veil that is very concretely perceptible in the development of colonisation in Algeria. In the beginning, the veil was a mechanism of resistance, but its value for the social group remained very strong. The veil was worn because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes, but also because the occupier *was bent on unveiling Algeria*. In a second phase, the mutation occurred in connection with the Revolution and under special circumstances. The veil was abandoned in the course of revolutionary action. What had been used to block the psychological or political offensives of the occupier became a means, an instrument. The veil helped the Algerian woman to meet the new problem created by the struggle.⁸⁵

Fanon wants to believe that through revolution and the subsequent freedom, all imbalances in the Algerian society will be rectified, including those related to gender, and especially the veil: 'We are able to affirm even now that when Algeria has gained her independence such questions will not be raised.'⁸⁶ The veil for Fanon is not associated with religion or Algerian women's identity as Muslims but rather its connection with traditional lore. Fanon observes that '[i]n the Arab world [...] the veil worn by women is at once noticed by the tourist. One may remain for a long time unaware of the fact that a Moslem does not eat pork or that he denies himself daily sexual relations during the month of Ramadan, but the veil worn by women appears with such constancy that it generally suffices to

⁸⁵ Fanon, 'Algeria Unveiled', p. 63.

⁸⁶ Fanon, 'Algeria Unveiled', pp. 47-48.

characterize Arab society.’⁸⁷ Seeing veiling as indicative of Islam’s nefarious attitude towards women became central to the European narrative of Islam, in which the veil symbolised the religion’s fundamental inferiority. An important fact rarely recognised in the veiling debate is that veiling predates Islam. An important Coptic intellectual, Salama Musa, wrote in his memoirs that his sisters and mother stopped wearing their veils in 1907 and 1908.⁸⁸ Christian women in the near east were veiled before the arrival of Islam and continued the practice in Europe up until the twelfth century; and before them Jewish, Roman, Greek, Zoroastrian, Assyrian, and Indian women were also veiled.⁸⁹ In the New Testament, St Paul insists that women must veil during their prayer, and warns that ‘if she refuses to wear a head covering, then she should shave off all her hair.’⁹⁰

Egyptian Sociologist Leila Ahmed writes of the imperial nineteenth century:

‘Veiling to Western eyes – the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies – became the symbol (in colonial discourse) of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam’s degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam.’⁹¹ Ahmed further observes that the views of the veil as a sign of Islam’s inferiority were predominant in the late nineteenth century, especially in France and Britain, both of which were involved in invasions of Muslim countries at that time.⁹² Lord Cromer, who was Britain’s first consul general in Egypt (11th September 1883-6th May 1907), repeated in his book the prevailing views of the time regarding Islam’s supposedly disrespectful attitude towards women, as demonstrated in the practise of veiling. According to Cromer, Christianity gave women dignity while Islam humiliated them, especially the fact that ‘the face of Moslem woman is veiled when she appears in

⁸⁷ Fanon, ‘Algeria Unveiled’, p. 35.

⁸⁸ Salama Musa, *The Education of Salama Musa* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961), p. 15.

⁸⁹ Mohja Kahf, ‘From Her Royal Body the Robe was Removed: The Blessings of the Veil and the Trauma of Forced Unveiling in the Middle East’, in *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics*, ed. Jennifer Heath (Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 27-44.

⁹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11. 3-17.

⁹¹ Ahmed, ‘The Discourse of the Veil’, in *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 152.

⁹² See Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

public. She lives a life of seclusion.’ In contrast, ‘the face of the European woman is exposed to view in public. The only restraints placed on her movement are those dictated by her own sense of propriety.’⁹³ Ironically, however, the same Lord Cromer refused to fund a school for women doctors that had been operating in Egypt since the 1830s, and when told of the local preference among women to be treated by female doctors, he replied, ‘I am aware that in exceptional cases women like to be attended by female doctors, but I conceive that in the civilized world, attendance by medical men is still the rule.’⁹⁴ However in his civilised world, he was not willing to give women the right to vote. He vehemently opposed the movement for women’s rights, and served for a time as the president of the Society Opposed to Women’s Suffrage. In a speech in the Queen’s Hall in March 1909 against the vote for women, Cromer asked whether it was acceptable for ‘an Imperial nation to dethrone woman from the position of gentle yet commanding influence she now occupies [...] and substitute in her place the unsexed woman voting at the polling booth.’⁹⁵ As this suggests, his argument that the seclusion of Muslim women was caused by the veil had more to do with justifying Britain’s invasion of Egypt than with a genuine desire to increase Muslim women’s participation in the public sphere. His strong opposition to women’s suffrage in Britain shows that he was not motivated by a real concern to promote women’s independence and empowerment.

Aboulela deals with the issue of veil in *Minaret*. Najwa and her friend, Randa, first discuss veil in the opening section of the novel in 1984 in Khartoum, and their discussion begins with Iranian women in the black chador in Khomeini’s Iran in 1979: ‘I turned the pages of an old *Time* magazine. Khomeini, the Iran-Iraq war, girls marching in black chadors, university girls [...] a woman held a gun. She was covered head to toe, hidden.’⁹⁶

⁹³ Evelyn Baring, ‘The Dwellers in Egypt’, in *Modern Egypt*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1908), pp. 155-57.

⁹⁴ Cromer Papers, cited in Judith E. Tucker, ‘Private and Public Life: Women and the Growth of the State’, in *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 122.

⁹⁵ Cited in Roger Owen, ‘Governing Egypt, 1883-1907’, in *Lord Cromer: Victorian Imperialist, Edwardian Proconsul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 374.

⁹⁶ Aboulela, *Minaret*, p. 29.

Randa glances at the magazine and expresses her disgust for the hijab: ‘totally retarded [...] we are supposed to go forward, not back to the Middle Ages. How can a woman work dressed like that? How can she work in a lab or play tennis or anything? [...] They are crazy. [...] Islam doesn’t say you should do that.’⁹⁷ Najwa’s second conversation with Randa concerning the veil happens over the telephone many years later in London. Randa is studying medicine at Edinburgh University, and the very sight of Muslim women students wearing the hijab on campus aggravates her. Moreover, Randa never socialises with other Sudanese students, “so many of them are now Islamists. You know the type, the wife in hijab having one baby after another.”⁹⁸ In her opinion, the hijab restricts women; it is a symbol of backwardness and narrow-mindedness, and should therefore be discarded. Najwa, on the other hand, has a soft spot for hijab and Islam. During her time as a student in Khartoum University, the sight of female students wearing hijab never annoyed her, rather she felt envious of them: ‘I envied them something I didn’t have but I didn’t know what it was.’⁹⁹

The wearing of the veil is not an easy and quick decision for Najwa; it takes her several years to arrive at. During that period, there are several significant stages and moments which influence her final decision to wear the veil: the recurrent images of the girls wearing the hijab; the students praying on the university campus; and her servants in Khartoum getting up in the morning after hearing the sound of the azan, whose words ‘passed through the fun [she] had had at the disco and it went to a place [she] didn’t know existed.’¹⁰⁰

Najwa’s first attempt to wear the hijab proves difficult:

⁹⁷ Aboulela, *Minaret*, p. 29.

⁹⁸ Aboulela, *Minaret*, p. 134.

⁹⁹ Aboulela, *Minaret*, p. 134.

¹⁰⁰ Aboulela, *Minaret*, p. 31.

I stood in front of the mirror and put the scarf over my hair. My curls resisted; the material squashed them down. They escaped, springing around my forehead, above my ears. [...] I didn't look like myself. Something was removed, streamlined; restrained; something was deflated. And was this the real me? [...] Untie the material; observe the transformation. Which made me look younger? Scarf or no scarf? Which made me look more attractive? The answer was clear to that one. I threw it on the bed. I was not ready yet; I was not ready for this step.¹⁰¹

Najwa's decision to not wear the scarf, on the basis that it does not make her look attractive, suggests that the veil is not being used as a political gambit by Aboulela. According to Robin Yassin-Kassab, '[t]he cloth [veil] has become a flag waved by Islamists and Islamophobes to define each other [...] Removing it, and putting it on are loaded political acts.'¹⁰² The veil for Aboulela is connected with the inner *sharia*, and has nothing to do with the right-wing politics in either Muslim countries or the west. Therefore when Najwa finally decides to wear the hijab, she feels a 'new gentleness'¹⁰³ around her. However, when she sees her mosque friends without the hijab for the first time at an all-female Eid party, she senses that she is now encountering their true selves: 'We are pleased to see each other without our hijabs and all dressed up for the party, delighted by the rare sight of each other's hair, the skin on our necks, the way make up brightens a face [...] some of us are transformed without our hijabs.'¹⁰⁴ At one point, Najwa describes the hijab as a 'uniform'¹⁰⁵ and this word further enhances her ambivalent attitude towards the veil. In an interview Aboulela confirmed this ambivalence. She described the sense of freedom she felt when first decided to wear the scarf in London in 1987, but also revealed, 'I don't really know [a Muslim woman] properly unless I see her without the hijab, that's how I

¹⁰¹ Aboulela, *Minaret*, p. 245.

¹⁰² Catherine Rashid, 'Cultural Translation and the Musafir: A Conversation with Robin Yassin-Kassab', *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*, 3.1 (2012), p. 155.

¹⁰³ Aboulela, *Minaret*, p. 247.

¹⁰⁴ Aboulela, *Minaret*, p. 184.

¹⁰⁵ Aboulela, *Minaret*, p. 186.

feel. So it is a kind of uniform, it does put a distance between you and the other person.’¹⁰⁶

Aboulela’s discussion of the veil in *Minaret* also complicates the phenomenon of veiling. In Aboulela’s fiction, the veil is neither a visible marker of Muslim women’s identity nor is it related to the Sudanese tradition. Veiling like faith is an individual’s personal journey in Aboulela’s fiction. The decision to wear a veil as Najwa’s independent choice further confirms that veiling has more connotations than just a mere symbol of control over the bodies and sexualities of Muslim women. Aboulela hopes that the west sees the veil in a different light: ‘It encourages me when a Western woman comments on my head scarf. When one says “That is a lovely color” or asks “Is that batik?” I feel that she has reached out to me.’¹⁰⁷ This ability to see the veil as more than a symbol is important in order to depoliticise veiling. However, as discussed above, in the context of the history of colonising Muslim lands and the current post-9/11 scenario, it would be difficult to understand veiling as a personal choice or as a piece of cloth in Muslim women’s apparel.

Faith and Conversion

The biased representation of Muslim women was widespread in the nineteenth century and is still prevalent in the present time. The United States of America, like France in Algeria in the twentieth century, uses the veil to validate the righteousness of the ‘War on Terror’ in the twenty-first century. 9/11, 7/7, and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq are some of the events of recent times which have made the already troubled relationship between the west and Islam even more difficult. In this environment of extreme mistrust and suspicion towards Islam, Rae’s conversion to Islam for a Muslim woman becomes even more problematic. For John A. Stotesbury, ‘such novels [*The Translator*] reiterate an implacable creed: for an Islamic woman to envisage personal fulfilment with a Western man, there is

¹⁰⁶ Claire Chambers, ‘An Interview with Leila Aboulela’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, 3/1 (2009), p. 93.

¹⁰⁷ Aboulela, ‘Restraint? Sure. Oppression? Hardly.’, *The Washington post*, 22nd 2007.

only one alternative: the man's conversion to Islam.'¹⁰⁸ I find this reading limited.

Aboulela is offering here a perspective, something which is not very new, but not familiar for the western audience. According to Aboulela:

I saw *The Translator*, as being a Muslim *Jane Eyre*. The problem in *Jane Eyre* is that Mr Rochester can't marry both Bertha and Jane at the same time. As a Muslim I was reading it, and from an Islamic point of view there is no problem. I mean, he can be married to both women. But even though I realised that, I still got caught up in the story, and I could still see things from Jane's perspective. When I wrote *The Translator*, then, I presented a specifically Muslim dilemma, that she can't marry Rae unless he converts. I was hoping that the reader, even though the reader is not a Muslim, would still get caught up in Sammar's dilemma, just as I had been engrossed by Jane's predicament. I see *Jane Eyre* as a very Christian book, a very religious book, in that the conflict is specific to Christianity: he can't marry two women at the same time. At the end of the novel, he converts after he becomes blind, and there are pages and pages of him talking about God and faith and so on.¹⁰⁹

Religion is as vital for Sammar as it was for Jane. Religion has played a very prominent and important role in the development of both Jane and Sammar. Readings by J. Jeffrey Franklin, Janet L. Larson, Marianne Thormahlen, Susan VanZanten Gallagher, and Amanda Witt, for example, all highlight the importance of religion in Jane's bildungsroman.¹¹⁰ Religion is also significant for Mr Rochester, and he persistently

¹⁰⁸ John A. Stotesbury, 'Genre and Islam in Recent Anglophone Romantic Fiction', in *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film*, ed. Susan Onega and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 80.

¹⁰⁹ Chambers, 'An Interview with Leila Aboulela', pp. 97-98.

¹¹⁰ See J. Jeffrey Franklin, 'The Merging of Spiritualities: Jane Eyre as Missionary of Love', *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 49 (1995), pp. 456-82; Janet L. Larson, 'Lady-Wrestling for Victorian Soul: Discourse, Gender and Spirituality in Women's Texts', *Religion and Literature*, 23.3 (1991), pp. 43-64; Marianne Thormahlen, *The Brontës and Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Susan VanZanten Gallagher, 'Jane Eyre and Christianity', in *Approaches to Teaching Brontë's Jane Eyre*, ed. Diane Long

explains his desire for Jane as a result of God's approval; during his proposal to Jane in his 'Eden-like'¹¹¹ orchard, Rochester asserts that "my Maker sanctions what I do."¹¹² He also wants Jane to take responsibility for his moral rejuvenation: "Is the wandering and sinful, but now rest-seeking and repentant man, justified in daring the world's opinion, in order to attach to him for ever, this gentle, gracious, genial stranger; thereby securing his own peace of mind and regeneration of life?"¹¹³ Jane does not resist this religious responsibility and replies: 'Sir [...] a Wanderer's repose or a Sinner's reformation should never depend on a fellow-creature. Men and women die; philosophers falter in wisdom, and Christians in goodness: if any one you know has suffered and erred, let him look higher than his equals for strength to amend, and solace to heal.'¹¹⁴ Maria Lamonca observes that Jane's persistence that an individual's redemption 'should never depend on a fellow creature' is consistent with the Evangelical emphasis on a "religion of the heart" – an intimate, direct, and unmediated relationship between the soul and its Creator.¹¹⁵ Towards the end of the novel Jane describes Rochester receiving his new-born son into his arms. As Rochester holds the infant, and 'acknowledged that God had tempered judgment with mercy,'¹¹⁶ we are reminded of Christ's birth, and of the new-born who came to save mankind from sin and death.¹¹⁷

Both Rae and Rochester realise that their conversions are a direct result of Divine interference. Wail S. Hassan points to 'the crucial distinction in the novel [*The Translator*] between translation as a discursive strategy aimed at influencing ideological worldviews in the secular realm, and conversion as a manifestation of God's will over and beyond human

Hoeveler and Beth Lau (New York: Modern Language Association, 1993), pp. 62-68; and Amanda B. Witt, "I Read It in Your Eye": Spiritual Vision in *Jane Eyre*, *Victorian Newsletter* (1994), pp. 29-34.

¹¹¹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1996), p. 278.

¹¹² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 287.

¹¹³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 246.

¹¹⁴ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 246.

¹¹⁵ Maria Lamonca, 'Jane's Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in "Jane Eyre"', *Studies in the Novel*, 34.3 (2002), p. 249.

¹¹⁶ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 501.

¹¹⁷ Lamonca, 'Jane's Crown of Thorns', p. 256.

agency.’¹¹⁸ As Rae says after embracing Islam: “‘I found out at the end that it didn’t have anything to do with how much I’ve read or how many facts I’ve learned about Islam. Knowledge is necessary, that’s true. But faith, it comes directly from Allah.’”¹¹⁹ Mr Rochester says towards the end of the novel: “‘Jane! You think me, I daresay, an irreligious dog: but my heart swells with gratitude to the beneficent God of this earth just now. He sees not as man sees, but far clearer: judges not as man judges, but far more wisely. [...] I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. I began to experience remorse, repentance; the wish for reconciliation to my Maker. I began sometimes to pray: very brief prayers they were, but very sincere.’”¹²⁰ Both Rae and Rochester acknowledge that faith which comes directly from God/Allah is beyond human comprehension or understanding. For Geoffrey Nash, ‘Sammar’s eventual victory, like Jane’s, is on her own terms. Rae’s eventual return, his having learned to pray like herself, is a statement that [...] political resistance [can be] subsumed by the deeper strength of religious assurance.’¹²¹ The major difference in both conversions is that of religion. However, because of the current politicisation of Islam, conversion of a western intellectual to Islam will not be an easy thing to comprehend. Islam in Aboulela’s fiction does not present a world where white men are fighting Muslim men in order to liberate Muslim women from the oppression of veiling; rather, it reverses this western narrative and presents a story where a veiled Muslim woman saves a white man.¹²²

Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) that three great topics emerge in decolonising cultural resistance: ‘One is the insistence on the right to see the

¹¹⁸ Wail S. Hassan, ‘Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction’, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 41.2-3 (2008), p. 309.

¹¹⁹ Aboulela, *The Translator*, p. 191.

¹²⁰ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 495.

¹²¹ Geoffrey Nash, ‘Re-siting Religion and Creating Feminised Space in the Fiction of Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela’, *Wasafiri*, 17 (2002), p. 30.

¹²² See Brendan Smyth, ‘To Love the Orientalist: Masculinity in Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator*’, *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality*, 1.2 (2007), p. 177; see also Smeeta Mishra, “‘Saving” Muslim Women and Fighting Muslim men: Analysis of Representations in *The New York Times*’, *Global Media Journal*, 6. 11(2007), <http://lass.purduecal.edu/cca/gmj/fa07/gmj-fa07-mishra.htm> [assessed 21st January 2013].

community's history whole, coherently, integrally. Restore the imprisoned nation to itself. [...] Second is the idea that resistance, far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history [...] and third is a noticeable pull away from separatist nationalism towards a more integrative view of human community and human liberation.'¹²³ Aboulela's fiction follows the second, and offers an alternative view of reading Muslims, and Islam. It is a 'conscious effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to make it acknowledge [...] forgotten histories.'¹²⁴ In 'The Museum', Aboulela describes the beginning of a faltering friendship between Shadia, a Muslim Sudanese student, and Bryan, a Scottish student at the University of Aberdeen. After some initial reluctance due to their different cultural and religious backgrounds, Bryan invites her to visit a museum display on Africa. However, the experience further reveals their inability to communicate; at the story's end, Shadia is left tearful and frustrated, while Bryan is confused. Bryan tries to comfort Shadia by insisting that '[m]useums change; I can change...'¹²⁵ However, Bryan's offering could be argued as naive. The African exhibition is a biased representation. In the museum '[Shadia] was alone with sketches of jungle animals, words on the wall.'¹²⁶ The museum holds many nineteenth-century collections of African material culture, whose accompanying texts makes Shadia uneasy: '*In serving an empire they gave and received, changed others and were themselves changed and often returned home with tangible reminders of their experiences.*'¹²⁷ This blinkered representation of Africa in the museum frustrates Shadia: 'Nothing was of her, nothing belonged to her life at home, what she missed. Here was Europe's vision, the clichés about Africa: cold and old.'¹²⁸ Bryan remains completely unaware of the effect on Shadia. On the other hand, Shadia realises that the Africa

¹²³ Said, 'Resistance and Opposition', in *Culture and Imperialism*, pp. 259-261.

¹²⁴ Said, 'Resistance and Opposition', p. 260.

¹²⁵ Leila Aboulela, 'The Museum', in *Coloured Lights* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2005), p. 105.

¹²⁶ Aboulela, 'The Museum', p. 104.

¹²⁷ Aboulela, 'The Museum', p. 101.

¹²⁸ Aboulela, 'The Museum', p. 102.

represented in the museum displays and academic books shapes Bryan's ideas about the continent; according to her, these are "lies [...] all wrong."¹²⁹ Bryan's view is obscured by the institutional blindness of written and visual texts, which is represented through the metaphor of the museum.¹³⁰

In *The Translator*, however, according to Brendan Smyth, Aboulela provides an alternative narrative for the relationship between a Muslim woman and Orientalist man.¹³¹ Rae's conversion also contradicts the popular notion that Muslim societies must convert to western ideas of democracy (particularly evident in the rhetoric of the 'War on Terror' and the 2013 debate over launching a strike against Syria) and secular humanism.¹³² According to Smyth, 'Aboulela's depiction of Islam as a foundation for social justice writes back to western imperial discourses which depict Islam as a backward, barbaric religion of extremists and terrorists.'¹³³ Rae explains to Sammar his interests in the Middle East:

'I wanted to understand the Middle East. No one writing in the fifties and sixties predicted that Islam would play such a significant part in the politics of the area. Even Fanon, who I have always admired, had no insight into the religious feelings of the North Africans he wrote about. He never made the link between Islam and anti-colonialism. When the Iranian revolution broke out, it took everyone by surprise. Who were these people? What was making them tick? Then there was a rush of writing, most of it misinformed. The threat that the whole region would be swept up in this, very much exaggerated. But that is understandable to some extent because for centuries there had been a tense relationship between the West and the

¹²⁹ Aboulela, 'The Museum', p. 105.

¹³⁰ See Kerry Vincent, 'Defamiliarizing Africa in Leila Aboulela's "The Museum"', *Afroeuropa*, 2.3 (2008), <http://journal.afroeuropa.eu/index.php/afroeuropa/article/viewFile/113/103> [accessed 22nd January 2012].

¹³¹ Smyth, 'To Love the Orientalist', p. 171.

¹³² According to Gustave von Grunebaum, Islam can modernise itself only by self-reinterpretation from a Western point of view, which, of course von Grunebaum shows is impossible. See Gustave von Grunebaum, *Modern Islam: The Search for Cultural Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964); David Cameron during a visit to Indonesia in April 2012, called on Islam to embrace democracy and reject extremism, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/apr/12/cameron-islam-embrace-democracy-extremism> [accessed 8th May 2012].

¹³³ Smyth, 'To Love the Orientalist', p. 180.

Middle East. Since the seventh century when the church denounced Islam as a heresy.’¹³⁴

Sammar tells Rae that “[t]he first believers were mostly women and slaves. I don’t know why, maybe they had softer hearts, I don’t know. . . .”¹³⁵ Rae replies, “[m]aybe in changing they did not have much to lose. [...] It was the rulers of Makkah who were reluctant to give up their traditions and established ways for something new.”¹³⁶ Rae’s perception of Islam as a religion of the oppressed highlights the importance of social justice in Islam. Ali Shari’ati, a prominent Iranian scholar writes: ‘Islam is the first school of social thought that recognises the masses as the basis, the fundamental and consensus factor in determining history – not the elect as Nietzsche thought, not the aristocracy and nobility as Plato claimed, not great personalities as Carlyle and Emerson believed, not those of pure blood as Alexis Carrel imagined, not the priests or the intellectuals, but the masses.’¹³⁷

Shari’ati finds in Islam a system that ‘does not consider the fundamental factor in social change and development to be personality, or accident, or overwhelming and immutable laws.’¹³⁸ It is for this reason, according to Shari’ati, ‘that we see throughout the Quran address being made to *al-naḥas*, i.e., the people.’¹³⁹ Shari’ati sees Islam as a religion of the masses, especially the marginalised and oppressed, rather than one of terrorists.

Sammar’s life before she develops strong feelings for Rae is described as intensely minimalist: ‘She lived in a room with nothing on the wall, nothing personal, no photographs, no books. [...] Pay the rent for the room and that was all. One plate, one

¹³⁴ Aboulela, *The Translator*, p. 106.

¹³⁵ Aboulela, *The Translator*, p. 121.

¹³⁶ Aboulela, *The Translator*, p. 121.

¹³⁷ Ali Shari’ati, ‘Approaches to the Understanding of Islam’, in *On the Sociology of Islam: Lectures by Ali Shari’ati*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979), p. 49.

¹³⁸ Shari’ati, ‘Approaches to the Understanding of Islam’, p. 48.

¹³⁹ Shari’ati, ‘Approaches to the Understanding of Islam’, p. 49.

spoon, a tin opener, two saucepans, a kettle, a mug. She didn't care, didn't mind.'¹⁴⁰ Self-neglect is shown in the fact that a lunchtime sandwich 'smeared only with butter, was wrapped up in the same clingfilm as the day before. [...] There was a green furry spot at the edge of the bread.'¹⁴¹ And for her, the prayers are 'the last touch with normality.'¹⁴² But it was love that brought her back to life. During one telephone conversation when Rae told her that she made him feel safe, 'she picked up the word "safe" and put it aside, to peel it later and wonder what it meant. Sitting on the floor of the landing, she thought that this was a miracle. Not only his voice, but that happiness could come here at the foot of the stairs, the same stairs that were, once, so difficult to climb, that led to her room of hibernation, the hospital room.'¹⁴³

It is the miracle of love that has given her another life. Rae's conversion triggered by love eventually translates Islam for him. Religion has a very important place in Sammar's life, but she wants Rae to convert initially for selfish reasons:

'If you say the *shahadah* it would be good enough. We could get married. If you just say the words. . .'

'I have to be sure. I would despise myself if I wasn't sure.'

'But people get married that way. Here in Aberdeen there are people who got married like this. . .'

'We are not like that. You and I are different. For them it is a token gesture.'¹⁴⁴

This shows that Sammar, who is a practising Muslim and whose life is centred around Islam, is also flawed and fragile. She wants Rae to convert for the sake of conversion, in order to become an eligible husband for her. However, by the end of the novel, she realises that her intentions for Rae's conversions are self-centred, and subsequently renounces

¹⁴⁰ Aboulela, *The Translator*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁴¹ Aboulela, *The Translator*, p. 35.

¹⁴² Aboulela, *The Translator*, p. 16.

¹⁴³ Aboulela, *The Translator*, p. 50.

¹⁴⁴ Aboulela, *The Translator*, pp. 124-125.

these motives, although she keeps on praying for his conversion. Sammar's responses to faith are not intransigent. She is trying to grasp what Aboulela calls 'Muslim logic',¹⁴⁵ the acceptance of Allah's will in her everyday life, including Rae's initial refusal to convert. For Aboulela and her characters, Islam does not stay within prayers and fasting, but rather becomes a part of one's daily life. Her characters are trying to comprehend the essence of the religious experience in their everyday routine, without any externally enforced *sharia*; as Aboulela herself points out, that she is not interested in writing "Islamically correct" literature.¹⁴⁶ Sammar's regular prayers for Rae's conversion imply that Islam, as she understands it, does not prohibit or criminalise such tender emotions. As Willy Maley contends, 'Sammar's story suggests that it's okay to be confused, rebellious, guilty, and selfish – and to fall in love again after a grievous loss, as faith restores and forgives.'¹⁴⁷

Shahrazad and Feminism

Sammar's romance in *The Translator* ends on a happy note, while Najwa's ends in feelings of guilt and self-recrimination. Najwa accepts money from Tamer's family to fund her trip to Mecca to perform Hajj, and in return she finishes her relationship with Tamer. Tamer's family opposes this relationship because of their age gap and social inequality. Najwa apparently prefers Hajj over her love for Tamer. For Hassan, this preference for religion, which he calls 'Aboulela's Islamism',¹⁴⁸ is regressive. What Hassan did not fully appreciate is that Najwa chooses conservative custom over Islamic example as Muhammad's first wife, Khadija, was almost fifteen years older than him. Najwa's decision for Hajj over Tamer is not a matter of preference but a realistic choice. She is aware of the age difference and class difference between them, but more importantly it was Tamer's

¹⁴⁵ Aboulela, 'Opinion', *Book Brunch*, 23rd December 2010.

¹⁴⁶ Aboulela, cited in Hassan, 'Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction', p. 310.

¹⁴⁷ Willy Maley, 'Conversion and Subversion in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* and Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*', in *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Scottish Literature*, ed. Michael Gardiner, Graeme MacDonald, and Niall O'Gallagher (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 195.

¹⁴⁸ Hassan, 'Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Immigrant Fiction', p. 316.

immaturity which discouraged her. By the end of the novel, she was ‘smeared with guilt’¹⁴⁹ that she had taken money from Tamer’s mother as a deal for leaving her son, but Najwa was not forced to take that money, she did it knowingly. She cannot see a future with an immature man, and thus makes a good deal out of it, though a difficult one emotionally.

Najwa fantasises about her ‘involvement in [Tamer’s] wedding to a young suitable girl who knows him less than [her].’ This wife ‘will mother children who spend more time with [her]’; Najwa would be Tamer’s ‘family concubine, like something out of *The Arabian Nights*.’¹⁵⁰ As Hassan argues, this fantasy suggests ‘a complete disavowal of personal liberty.’¹⁵¹ I find this reading blinkered. Aboulela’s reference to *The Arabian Nights* is pertinent here. Shahrazad or Scheherazade is the story teller in that text, also known as *The Thousand and One Nights*. Shahrazad has recently attracted the attention of many Muslim women writers (especially those who are interested in the politics of gender and identity), who have investigated her character and tales, arguing that they challenge western perceptions of Shahrazad as a sexualised, dull, and passive Oriental woman. Antoine Galland, the first European translator of *The Arabian Nights*, worked from the incomplete fourteenth-century Arabic manuscript of the text, which had only 270 stories.¹⁵² According to Suzanne Gauch, early in the eighteenth century, Galland collected tales and anecdotes from various sources in order to generate one thousand and one stories.¹⁵³ Gauch contends that the unknown origins and instability of the stories, and of Shahrazad herself have made it possible for the translators to put words into her mouth over the centuries.¹⁵⁴ Muhsin Mahdi argues in a similar vein that Antoine Galland

¹⁴⁹ Aboulela, *The Minaret*, p. 276.

¹⁵⁰ Aboulela, *The Minaret*, p. 215.

¹⁵¹ Hassan, ‘Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Immigrant Fiction’, p. 313.

¹⁵² See Suzanne Gauch, ‘Preface’, in *Liberating Shahrazad: Feminism, Postcolonialism, and Islam* (London & Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. x; see also Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London & New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

¹⁵³ Gauch, ‘Preface’, p. x.

¹⁵⁴ Gauch, ‘Introduction’, p. 2; Muhsin Mahdi’s work on the Syrian manuscript that inspired Antoine Galland’s translation revealed that the favourite tales of Aladdin and Ali Baba were in fact the fabrication of

manipulated the unfinished fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript and fabricated the work we know today as the *Nights*. Mahdi suggests that the European reception and translations of the *Nights* changed the very shape of the work, which further confirmed Edward Said's claim that '[t]he Orient was almost a European invention':¹⁵⁵

The number and size of the stories included under the title of the *Nights* kept growing, and the *Urtext* was identified in the minds of nineteenth-century students with the most complete text, that is, the text that contained the largest number of stories regardless of their provenance. This enormous corpus became the fertile field for anthropological, historical, linguistic, and cultural studies, without anybody having the vaguest idea as to how and why the same title was called upon to embrace them. The only notion that justified this process in the public's mind was the idea of the Orient as the *Urtext* of the *Nights*.¹⁵⁶

Gauch suggests that the *Nights* has not generally been investigated and analysed as a literary work, but rather as a supposedly accurate representation of the 'Arab Orient.'¹⁵⁷

Subsequently, Shahrazad as an Oriental woman is generally perceived within western culture as a beautiful, exotic seductress. The Moroccan feminist scholar Fatima Mernissi confronts the Orientalist narratives of Shahrazad, and contends that the character stakes her life on the power of her stories; this confirms that Shahrazad is not only intelligent and audacious, but also shrewd enough to manipulate her circumstances to save her life.¹⁵⁸ According to Mernissi, the Oriental Shahrazad is 'purely cerebral, and that is the essence of her sexual attraction':¹⁵⁹ 'Scheherazade had read the books of literature,

translators. See Muhsin Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), pp. 72-86; and Irwin, *The Arabian Nights*, pp. 54-62.

¹⁵⁵ Said, 'Introduction', in *Orientalism*, p. 1.

¹⁵⁶ Mahdi, 'Antoine Galland and the *Nights*', in *The Thousand and One Nights*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁷ Gauch, 'Introduction', p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ See Fatima Mernissi, *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001).

¹⁵⁹ Mernissi, 'On the Western Harem Front', in *Scheherazade Goes West*, p. 39.

philosophy, and medicine. She knew poetry by heart, had studied historical reports, and was acquainted with the sayings of men and the maxims of sages and kings. She was intelligent, knowledgeable, wise, and refined. She had read and learned.’¹⁶⁰ Mernissi argues that this understanding of Shahrazad stands in stark contrast to the western perceptions of the character, which views her as an acquiescent Oriental woman; one who only survives King Shahrayar’s malice and brutality because of her salacious beauty. Mernissi suggests that Shahrazad presents Muslim women writers with two major challenges. The first is to fight patriarchal violence and religious extremism at home; the second is to deal with imperialist anti-Islamic critics in the west. The Parisian writer and activist Marie Lahy-Hollebecque argues that Shahrazad is a feminist: ‘If one recalls that this occurs in an Islamic land, and in an era where all forms of slavery subsisted the world over, one rests astounded by the audacity of views, the absence of prejudices, that permitted an Arab narrator to assign to a woman a role that our Middle Ages never contemplated and that our twentieth century envisions only with great reluctance.’¹⁶¹ After 9/11, Shahrazad resurfaced again alongside undercover woman, and Muslim women writers have used this opportunity to restore her back to a position of confident authority and political astuteness, which has been denied her in European translations and adaptations. *Minaret* is set in the post-9/11 world, where a new and wrathful imperial power is emerging; Aboulela’s deliberate reference to Shahrazad is an effort to reclaim her image from the misconstrued European view, a result of imperial prejudice. As Mernissi suggests, ‘[i]f the West has the power to control time by manipulating images, I thought, then who are we if we do not control our images? Who am I – and who makes my image?’¹⁶² Therefore, it is important for Muslim women to tell their own stories, control narrative process, and define their subjectivities. The ending of *Minaret* also raises

¹⁶⁰ Cited in Mernissi, ‘The Mind as Erotic Weapon’, in *Scheherazade Goes West*, p. 47.

¹⁶¹ Cited in Suzanne Gauch, ‘Introduction’, in *Liberating Shahrazad*, p. 4.

¹⁶² Mernissi, ‘Jacques’s Harem: Unveiled but Silent Beauties’, in *Scheherazade Goes West*, p. 111.

questions about the western hegemony over feminist ideals.¹⁶³ About the ending of her second novel Aboulela says:

When I was writing *Minaret*, I was thinking it would be a Muslim feminist novel. The female protagonist is disappointed in the men in her life: her father disappoints her, then lets her down, she becomes very disillusioned with her boyfriend Anwar, and even Tamer – who is represented sympathetically because he is religious like her – even he disappoints her because of his immaturity. At the end, she relies on God and on her faith. That's how my logic went. And I thought that if this were a secular feminist novel, then at the end she would rely on her career and maybe her friends after her disappointment with men. In *Minaret*, on the other hand, I wanted it to be that at the end she's relying on her faith rather than a career.¹⁶⁴

For Najwa, to live in Tamer's harem¹⁶⁵ or to go to Mecca to perform Hajj are not odd choices; however, they become odd when they are placed within Eurocentric definitions of female empowerment. Eva Hunter criticises Aboulela for putting Islam and feminism together. Hunter argues that as a secular feminist, any appeal to 'tradition', whether in the name of 'religious beliefs' or 'culture' is problematic for her.¹⁶⁶ Afsaneh Najmabadi discusses the tension between religion and secularism in her essay '(Un)veiling Feminism.'

According to Najmabadi, combining modernity with a reconfiguration of Islam is

¹⁶³ See Claire Chambers, 'Recent Literary Representations of British Muslims', in *Mediating Faiths: Religion and Socio-Cultural Change in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Michael Bailey and Guy Redden (Farnham & Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 175-188.

¹⁶⁴ Chambers, 'An Interview with Leila Aboulela', p. 99.

¹⁶⁵ Fatima Mernissi argues that harem as a sexual heaven and its female dwellers as nude and sensual odalisque [female slave or concubine in a harem] is a western invention. She contends that for her, the word harem is 'a synonym for the family as an institution' and it never occurred to her 'to associate it with something jovial' (p. 12). According to Mernissi, 'women's obsequiousness, their readiness to obey, is a distinctive feature of the Western harem fantasy' (p. 26). For Mernissi, 'Westerners had their harem and I had mine, and the two had nothing in common' (p. 14). She further argues that Hollywood movies and painters like Picasso and Matisse play a crucial role in the propagation of the false images of Muslim harems in the west. See Fatima Mernissi 'Jacques's Harem: Unveiled But Silent Beauties', 'My Harem: Harun Ar-Rachid, the Sexy Caliph', and 'In the Intimacy of the European Harem: Monsieur Ingres' in *Scheherazade Goes West*, pp. 98-116, 117-129, 146-166.

¹⁶⁶ Eva Hunter, 'The Muslim "Who Has Faith" in Leila Aboulela's Novels *Minaret* (2005) and *Lyrics Alley* [2010]', *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 25.1 (2013), p. 88.

considered as traditional and anti-modern.¹⁶⁷ Aboulela's appeal to Islam becomes problematic for secular feminism. For Najmabadi, 'feminism in this situation becomes a screen category (a veil) occluding a historical process by which one kind of modernity was fashioned through the expulsion of Islam onto the beyond of modernity, where backwardness and religion are conflated as Secularism's abject other.'¹⁶⁸ However, according to Najmabadi, the surfacing of a vocal feminist position from within the ranks of the Islamist movement has destabilised the boundaries between 'hard-line Islamists' and 'secular feminists.'¹⁶⁹ Aboulela's work also undermines the supposedly rigid boundary between orthodox Islam and secular feminism, by placing female characters within a Sufi Islamic framework, but enabling them to take control of their lives without depending on any man, whether in the form of a father or a husband or a boyfriend. Pakistani sociologist Farida Shaheed explains that there is a growing perception that despite the wide diversity of the Muslim world, 'the cultural articulation of patriarchy (through structures, social mores, laws and political power) is increasingly justified by reference to Islam and Islamic doctrine.'¹⁷⁰ It is important to understand that misogynistic traditions in Muslim societies are not sanctioned by Islam. Fatima Mernissi investigates the reliability of several *hadiths* attributed to the Prophet Muhammad in her work, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (1991). She demonstrates that two often-quoted *hadiths* are falsely attributed: firstly, 'those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity'; and secondly, 'when dogs, asses, and women intervene between the worshipper and the qibla, they disturb prayer.'¹⁷¹ Mernissi argues that the propagation of these *hadiths* by male

¹⁶⁷ Afsaneh Najmabadi, '(Un)veiling Feminism', in *Secularism*, ed. Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 51.

¹⁶⁸ Najmabadi, '(Un)veiling Feminism', p. 52.

¹⁶⁹ Najmabadi, '(Un)veiling Feminism', pp. 43, 52.

¹⁷⁰ Farida Shaheed, 'Networks?', in *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 79.

¹⁷¹ See Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991).

clerics reflect their refusal to acknowledge women's strong position in Muhammad's society.¹⁷²

Women played an important role in Muhammad's mission to spread Islam. His first wife, Khadija Bin Khuwaylid, was a successful business woman; she was his employer, and fifteen years his senior. She proposed to Muhammad, and became the first convert of Islam when he reported his revelation to her in 610. Khadija supported Muhammad financially and morally until her death in 619, and was his only wife for twenty-eight years. He married Ayesha three years after Khadija's death. Following Muhammad's death, Ayesha was considered the main source of *hadiths*, and was also acknowledged as a respected interpreter of the *Quran*. The wives of the Prophet were significant counsellors and confidants for him, not being restricted and marginalised in a separate domestic sphere as mothers. They were active in all areas, and played their part in shaping Islamic culture as we know it today.¹⁷³ Khadija and Ayesha should be strong role models for contemporary Muslim women; however, rigid interpretations of Islam prevented the full realisation of this. The trope of Shahrazad in these circumstances becomes extremely important for writers like Aboulela and Mernissi, who place her within the context of Muslim women's history, confronting the male monopolisation of Islam. Consequently, reading Aboulela's work and understanding her characters' deep relationship with Islam shows that the religion cannot be considered as inherently regressive, anti-freedom, misogynistic, and against the spirit of feminism.¹⁷⁴

Anour Majid argues in his work that after independence, new nationalist governments copied the colonial model of the nation-state; they willingly accepted their neo-colonial status by subscribing to a variety of multinational organisations, controlled by

¹⁷² Mernissi, 'Conclusion', in *Women and Islam*, p. 191.

¹⁷³ See Miriam Cooke, 'Women, Religion, and Postcolonial Arab World', *Cultural Critique*, 45 (2000), pp. 167-170; see also Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Bint al Shati, *The Wives of the Prophet*, trans. Matti Moosa and D. Nicholas Ranson (NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006).

¹⁷⁴ See Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Quran and Woman* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd., 1992).

former colonisers, while simultaneously ‘perpetuating a stagnant, apolitical, and mostly reactionary version of Islam.’¹⁷⁵ According to Majid, these new post-independence developments have had devastating consequences for Islam, and also for the poor of the third world, who are repressed by dictatorships and bureaucracies, ‘often financed and upheld by metropolitan centres.’¹⁷⁶ He argues that these problems are exacerbated when states, in tandem with international organisations, further subjugate the poor through unjust economic policies. Islamic extremism is the outcome of these economic inequalities, and also of the control of Islam by states, which can exploit fundamentalism to their own ends when the need arises.¹⁷⁷ But then the question is how to deal with this issue of extremism. According to An-Na’im, the best way to fight against Islamic extremism today is not through the adoption of a secular ideology, but through reforms that would make Islam a viable modern ideology.¹⁷⁸ In *Minaret*, Anwar, an atheist, is hostile to the west. He burns the American flag and leads a student demonstration against IMF.¹⁷⁹ However, after seeking political asylum in London his ‘anti-imperialist convictions’ become less critical.¹⁸⁰ Sadia Abbas argues that these developments in Anwar imply that it is not an atheist but rather a practising Muslim like Najwa who can stand in for an Islam that is able to make its peace with the west.¹⁸¹ A comprehensively redefined Islam, in a vibrant

¹⁷⁵ Anouar Majid, ‘Women’s Freedom in Muslim Spaces’, in *Postcolonial Islam in a Polycentric World* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 105.

¹⁷⁶ Majid, ‘Women’s Freedom in Muslim Spaces’, p. 119.

¹⁷⁷ The madrassa phenomenon in Pakistan is an example of the extreme divide between the poor and rich, and the exploitation of Islam for various political and material gains. Madrassas became popular during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1980. During that time, Pakistan opposed the Russian invasion; mujahidin (now called terrorists) were trained in Pakistani madrassas to fight against Russian forces in Afghanistan with the financial support of America. However, at the present time, most of them are not in control of the Pakistani government. In Pakistan, frequent suicide attacks reflect not only the politicisation of Islam, but also economic disparities, which lead people to religiously motivated crimes; most of the students in madrassas come from very poor families. Madrassas provide them not only with free education, but also accommodation, clothing and food. Many of the madrassas financed by Saudi Arabia, with their orthodox interpretation of Islam, known as Wahhabi, provide a radical anti-Pakistan curriculum. See Steven R. David, ‘Pakistan: Loose Nukes’, in *Catastrophic Consequences: Civil Wars and American Interests* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 50-81.

¹⁷⁸ See Mahmud Muhammad Taha, *The Second Message of Islam* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

¹⁷⁹ Aboulela, *Minaret*, p. 156.

¹⁸⁰ Aboulela, *Minaret*, p. 156.

¹⁸¹ Sadia Abbas, ‘Leila Aboulela, Religion, and the Challenge of the Novel’, *Contemporary Literature*, 52.3 (2011), p. 446.

relationship with other cultures, can be an effective substitute to both westernisation and rigid interpretations of Islam. Zib Mir-Hosseini argues that this progressive reform is only possible in those societies where 'Islam is no longer part of the oppositional discourse in national politics.'¹⁸² The monopoly of male clerics over Islam, partly enabled by the collusion of corrupt postcolonial governments, needs to be confronted. Therefore, the revival of *ijtihad*¹⁸³ is now urgent and crucial. Islam as a religion and faith does not endorse misogynist traditions; rather this has been perpetuated by the exploitation of Islam, ironically by its religious scholars (the majority of them men) pursuing for their own advantages. These come either in the form of a power-sharing in government or monetary benefits; the resulting situation gives the impression that Islam itself sanctions women's subjugation and repression.

A more nuanced understanding of Islam can ultimately lead to the demise of despotic rulers and egotistical Imams, as Sammar points out to Rae:

'One hadith that says, "The best Jihad is when a person speaks the truth before a tyrant ruler." It is not often quoted and we never did it at school. I would have remembered it.'

'With the kind of dictatorship with which most Muslim countries are ruled', he said, 'it is unlikely that such a hadith would make its way into the school curriculum'

'But we should know. . .'¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 'Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Shari'a in Post-Khomeini Iran', in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. M. Yamani (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1996), p. 285.

¹⁸³ *Ijtihad* is defined as a critical thinking and independent judgement by the jurist 'to master and apply the principles and rules of *usuul al-fiqh* (legal theory) for the purpose of discovering God's law.' However, this practice ceased about the end of the third/ninth century, with the consent of the Muslim jurists themselves, and this process is known as 'closing the gate of Ijtihad.' See Wael B. Hallaq, 'Was the Gate of Ijtihad Closed?', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 16.1 (1984), p. 3; M. M. Bravman, *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam: Studies in Ancient Arab Concepts* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), p. 189; and J. Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 70-71.

¹⁸⁴ Aboulela, *The Translator*, p. 105.

Aboulela demonstrates through her work that Islam has been hijacked by corrupt postcolonial governments and extreme right-wing groups who have reduced its complexity to one reductive religious ideology. Her interpretation of Islam is not orthodox, and her characters do not strictly follow established religious codes. For Aboulela, Islamic *sharia* is ‘something personal [...] something you would follow yourself. It does not need anyone else to implement it.’¹⁸⁵ Aboulela has opened up the world of Muslims, and particularly Muslim women that for many western audiences has been closed, encrypted or barely visible. Aboulela’s female protagonists are strong examples of ethical, independent women who provide refreshing possibilities for Muslim women, and thus do not need saving by the west.

¹⁸⁵ Chambers, ‘An Interview with Leila Aboulela’, p. 97.

Conclusion: Resisting Books of Not, Writing Books of Something

Where to find the proper word
 For the door of silence . . .
 To open the story's dance
 Close to my woman's skin
 Which the good Lord created
 As an instrument of unpublished music.¹

African Women Writers and Fredric Jameson

In this thesis, I have argued for a thorough critical appraisal of African women's writing within its distinctive socio-cultural locations. African women writers' engagements with major political issues – such as polygamy, colonial education, African feminist critique, the veil, and Islamophobia – complicate Fredric Jameson's claim that '[t]hird-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*.'² Elleke Boehmer has argued that in the immediate post-independence period in Africa, male writers monopolised the field of writing which ultimately created a male-centred nationalism:³

Despite professed ideals, nationalisms do not address all individuals equally: significant distinctions and discriminations are made along gendered (and also class and racial) lines. Such distinctions are not mere decorations; on the contrary, nationalism relies heavily on gendered languages to imagine itself. Gender informs nationalism and nationalism in its turn consolidates and legitimates itself through a

¹ Tanella Boni, 'Where to Find the Proper Word', in *Women Writing Africa: West Africa and the Sahel*, ed. Esi Sutherland-Addy and Aminata Diaw (New York: The Feminist Press, 2005), p. 412.

² Fredric Jameson, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (1986), p. 69.

³ Elleke Boehmer, 'Stories of Women and Mothers: Gender and Nationalism in the Early Fiction of Flora Nwapa', in *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, ed. Susheila Nasta (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 9.

variety of gendered structures and shapes which, either as ideologies or as political movements, are clearly tagged: the idea of nationhood bears a masculine identity though national ideals may wear a feminine face.⁴

Since the idea of nationhood or nationalism often assumes 'a masculine identity', it is a difficult domain for women to find an assertive voice and original vision. African woman has been given the sole identity of motherhood, 'a feminine face' and subsequently she is forced to stay within the private domestic realm as she cannot legitimately have any other identity. In the work of most male African writers, female figures are delineated in limited roles. As discussed above, women are identified either as mothers – as with Mumbai in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) – or harlots, as with Wanja in *Petals of Blood* (1977). Achebe also portrays women in symbolic forms in his fiction, for example, Beatrice Okoh as a goddess in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). Senghor's poem 'Black Woman,' converts African womanhood into a resonant symbol of Mother Africa:

Nude woman, black woman,
 Clothed in your color which is life itself, in your form which is beauty!
 I grew in your shadow, and the softness of your hands covered my eyes.
 Then, in the heat of Summer and Noon, suddenly I discover you, Promised Land,
 from the top of a high parched hill
 And your beauty strikes me to the heart, like the flash of an eagle.⁵

'Nude woman, black woman', pure and uncontaminated by the colonial powers, symbolises Mother Africa. This text fetishises the female form, and converts the woman into an object of male voyeurism. This 'discovery' of the 'Promised Land' by a male gaze

⁴ Boehmer, 'Stories of Women and Mothers', p. 6.

⁵ Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'Black Woman', in *Negritude: Black Poetry from Africa and the Caribbean*, ed. and trans. Norman Shapiro (New York: October House, 1970), p. 131.

affirms the passive and symbolic status of black woman. This idealised image of 'la femme noire', 'the black woman', is a persisting emblem of Negritude writings.

Negritude developed in the 1930s as a revolt against French domination, a refusal of assimilation, and a reaffirmation of the Negro self by endorsing black values and black culture. Negritude rejects the colonisers' assessment of African history and culture as primitive and barbaric. Negritude movement calls attention to the richness of African oral literary heritage, African sculpture, music and art, which also inspired Picasso, Braque and other European artists.⁶ The work of American anthropologist Melville Herskovits also shows the diversity and richness of African civilizations.⁷ Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal, Aimé Césaire from Martinique and Léon Damas from French Guiana are considered the founding fathers of the Negritude movement. Aimé Césaire coined the term Negritude in 1936-1937, and it heralded the birth of Pan-Africanist literature among black Francophone male writers.⁸ Senghor defines it as 'a weapon, an instrument of liberation and as a contribution to the humanism of the twentieth century.'⁹ For Césaire, Negritude is an acknowledgement of 'a fact, a revolt, and the acceptance of responsibility of [my] race.'¹⁰ According to Damas, Negritude is a 'rejection of an assimilation that negated [my] spontaneity and as a defense for [my] condition as Negro and Guyanese.'¹¹ However, this philosophy of Negritude which helped Africans in their struggle against colonial powers has been read as a 'masculinist ideology', which is 'constructed by the founding poets [and] shored up by literary historians, critics, and Africanist philosophers [who] continue to elide and minimize the presence and contributions of French speaking black women to

⁶ See Lilyan Kesteloot, *Black Writers in French: A Literary History of Negritude*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1991), pp. xviii, xxv.

⁷ See Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941); and Melville Herskovits, *The New World Negro* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).

⁸ See T. Denean Shapley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

⁹ Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century' in *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History and Representation*, ed. Roy R. Grinker, Stephen C. Lubkemann, and Christopher B. Steiner, 2nd edn (Chichester, West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010), p. 477.

¹⁰ Cited in Kesteloot, 'The Poetry of Negritude', in *Black Writers in French*, p. 119.

¹¹ Cited in Kesteloot, 'The Poetry of Negritude', p. 120.

Negritude's evolution.'¹² Christopher Miller argues that '[w]hile nuances are to be found within Negritude poetry and essays, it is nonetheless fair to state that the movement as a whole reflected and participated in the exclusion of women.'¹³ This patriarchal construct of Negritude leaves little room for a woman if she cannot or does not fit within the prescribed role of mother. However, the work of these male writers portrays mothers as symbols and thus does not engage with the real lives of women. This dichotomy between symbol and everyday reality in the lives of mothers is portrayed in detail by Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). According to Miriam Tlali, an important South African woman novelist, 'it is a problem when men want to call you Mother Africa and put you on a pedestal, because then they want you to stay there forever without asking your opinion – and [they are] unhappy if you want to come down as an equal human being.'¹⁴ Writers like Emecheta argue for motherhood as a choice, not an essential part of female identity.

African women writers' response to the essentialised identity of mother is their entry into the forbidden territory of war and national politics. This transgression of gender boundaries is their effort to reclaim history in order to incorporate their versions of events. These writers' versions do not glamorise conflict, but rather expose the harsh realities, in which patriotism is sold as a commodity, and the vulnerable in society (children, women and the elderly) pay the price. Nigerian women writers in particular condemn the detrimental and criminal role of both Nigerian and Biafran armies against the civilian population. In *Destination Biafra*, women form their own militia in order to protect themselves and their families against the vicious acts of both Nigerian and Biafran soldiers: "Biafra, Biafra, what is Biafra? You killed our man from this part, Nwokolo; the Nigerian soldiers came and killed what your soldiers left [...] You call us fools because we fought

¹² T. Denean Shapley-Whiting, 'Introduction: Caliban's Women', in *Negritude Women*, p. 14.

¹³ Christopher Miller, 'Senegalese Women Writers, Silence, and Letters: Before the Canon's Roar', in *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 259-260.

¹⁴ Cited in Mineke Schipper, 'Mother Africa on a Pedestal: The Male Heritage in African Literature and Criticism', *African Literature Today*, 15 (1987), pp. 35-54 (p. 49).

your wars for you, and you are well protected in your place, claiming the glory?’”¹⁵

Emecheta’s work does not describe the Nigerian civil war as a struggle for independence but rather as a criminal event in which leaders of both Biafra and Nigeria systematically and knowingly deceive their people. This scepticism about ‘patriotism’ and ‘freedom’ further confirms that the literature of the third world is more complex than mere ‘national allegory.’

Aboulela’s accounts of Islam and Muslim women also challenge Jameson’s assumption that ‘a popular or socially realistic third-world novel tends to come before us, not immediately, but as though already read.’¹⁶ According to Jameson, for the third-world reader, the narrative ‘which strikes us as conventional or naive, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share.’¹⁷ Aboulela’s narrative has subverted western discourses of Islam as an oppressive religion for women, and has offered a new perspective of reconciliation and love, where a male western intellectual converts to Islam for a Muslim woman. As Aboulela explains, ‘I want to write about the faith, but it’s so difficult to talk about it like this when everyone else is talking about the political aspects. I’m concerned that Islam has not just been politicized but that it’s becoming an identity. This is like turning religion into a football match, it’s a distraction from the real thing.’¹⁸ Such attitudes are illustrated by the fact that Rae’s conversion to Islam remains the main focus for many critics of *The Translator*. Elizabeth Russell argues that Sammar’s desire for Rae ‘can only flourish if Rae converts to Islam, and that is *too high a price to pay*’¹⁹ (emphasis added). Alexandra Schultheis also describes the

¹⁵ Buchi Emecheta, *Destination Biafra* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1983), p. 230.

¹⁶ Jameson, ‘Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, p. 66.

¹⁷ Jameson, ‘Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, p. 66.

¹⁸ Leila Aboulela, ‘Back to Khartoum: Leila Aboulela Returns to the Land of Her Fathers’, *The Independent*, December 17, 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/back-to-khartoum-leila-aboulela-returns-to-the-land-of-her-fathers-2162261.html> [accessed 26th July 2013].

¹⁹ Elizabeth Russell, ‘The Translation of Seduction and Desire in Cross-Cultural European Contexts’, in *Loving Against the Odds: Women’s Writing in English in a European Context*, ed. Elizabeth Russell (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 58.

relationship as ‘doomed by Sammar’s religious convictions,’²⁰ viewing Islam as an obstacle to the lovers’ union. However, according to Shirin Edwin, the emphasis upon Islam versus the west disregards Sammar’s and Rae’s thoughts and feelings, obstructing the crucial shift from a highly-politicised Islam to the focus upon Islam as a binding belief in their lives.²¹ Edwin argues that:

[e]ach instance when Sammar evokes the Qur’an, the hadith, or the enactment of any aspect of her faith, occurs against the background of her struggle to fight pain and emotional grief at a traumatic time in her life. A striking similarity in coping with trauma and emotional grief is also seen in the description of Rae’s life.

Sammar and Rae’s conversations are frequently interlaced with Rae’s two failed marriages—a burden he still carries within him.²²

I concur with Edwin that Rae and Sammar’s argument over his conversion can be seen ‘in the light of the emotional fragility of two disturbed individuals, for the quarrel is more a sign of personal weakness and error [...] than a doctrinal debate between two Islamic scholars on the conversion to Islam.’²³ For Sammar, Islam does not stay only within prayers and rituals, but pervades every aspect of her life. Islam gives her strength to face exile, the death of her husband, the separation from her son, and enables her to love again.

Comparative Analysis of the Work of African Female and Male Writers

Reading African women writers alongside African male writers greatly clarifies the intricate politics of female identity and authorship. For example, comparing women’s war narratives with Achebe’s latest book, *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012), presents some stark contrasts. Similarly, Dangarembga’s politics of colonial

²⁰ Alexandra Schultheis, ‘From Heterotopia to Home: The University and the Politics of Postcoloniality in Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* and Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator*’, in *Africa Writing Europe: Opposition, Juxtaposition, Entanglement*, ed. Maria Olausson and Christina Angelfors (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 205.

²¹ See Shirin Edwin, ‘(Un)Holy Alliances: Marriage, Faith, and Politics in Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator*’, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, 9.2 (2013), pp. 58-79.

²² Edwin, ‘(Un)Holy Alliances’, p. 73.

²³ Edwin, ‘(Un)Holy Alliances’, p. 74.

education can be usefully measured against Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventures* (1962); Bâ's criticism of the abuse of the institution of polygamy placed alongside Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (1974); and Aboulela's discussions of faith and reconciliation considered in conjunction with Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966).

Achebe briefly discussed the Nigerian civil war in his work *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983), but his latest (and unfortunately last) work, *There was a Country* is the only detailed analysis of the Nigerian tragedy. In this text, Achebe offers a sympathetic assessment of the Biafran leader, Lt. Colonel Ojukwu; he justifies Ojukwu's escape as a clever strategy on his part to deny Gown (the Nigerian leader) any closure which he could achieve by punishing Ojukwu.²⁴ Achebe's opinion of Ojukwu contrasts sharply with that of the two Nigerian women writers. The narrators of their fictions, Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and Debbie in *Destination Biafra*, disparage Ojukwu for endangering communities with his false promises, and also denounce him for his secret escape after the defeat of Biafra.²⁵ Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Nigerian intellectual and novelist, deplores the Biafran leader Ojukwu for his 'masturbatory egoism',²⁶ and for killing Ogoni and other minorities in the east. Saro-Wiwa's non-partisan depiction of the conflict in *Sozaboy* (1985) sees no glory in bloodshed and destruction: 'I was just thinking how the war have spoiled my town Dukana, uselessly many people, killed many others. [...] And I was thinking how I was prouder before to go to soza and call myself Sozaboy. But now if anybody say anything about war or even fight, I will just run and run and run and run and run.'²⁷ Ugwu, another 'sozaboy' (who has been kidnapped in order to be recruited into the Biafran army) in *Half of a Yellow Sun* learns at the end of the novel that "[t]here is no such thing as

²⁴ See Chinua Achebe, *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 224.

²⁵ See Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, pp. 230-231, 258; and Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 313.

²⁶ Ken Saro-Wiwa, 'Civil War', in *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (London, Lagos & Port Harcourt: Saros International Publishers, 1992), p. 27.

²⁷ Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Sozaboy* (New York: Longman Publishing Group, 2005), p. 181.

greatness.”²⁸ However, in Achebe’s work, a sense of ‘us’ (Biafrans) and ‘them’ (Nigerians) still exists. After the defeat of Biafra, Achebe claims that ‘Nigeria had not succeeded in crushing the spirit of the Igbo people.’²⁹ Moreover, he argues that Nigeria’s present backwardness is due to the entrenched prejudice towards Igbos in denying them opportunities for re-reintegration into Nigeria.³⁰ However, Emecheta, and Adichie strive to delegitimise the superiority of various ethnicities, including the Igbo, so that Nigerians as one nation can reconcile with their bitter past and move towards the future. Achebe also canvasses the important role which an Anglo-American political and diplomatic alliance can play in resolving African conflicts.³¹ This runs counter to the politics of Nigerian women writers. Adichie’s representation of Richard as a timid character, and his inability to fulfil Kainene sexually suggests that Africa no longer needs former colonial powers to solve their troubles. Debbie’s refusal to leave Nigeria with her British lover Alan at the end of Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* also mirrors the politics of Nigeria’s independence, as the country throws off indirect British rule.

Against Mustafa Sa’eed’s crudely assertive masculinity – liberating Africa with his penis³² in Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* – can be set Aboulela’s narratives of faith and acceptance of diverse cultures and different values. Aboulela uses the opening paragraph of Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* as an epigraph for the second half of *The Translator*. However, the comparison between *The Translator* and *Season of Migration to the North* makes Aboulela uncomfortable: ‘Tayeb Salih is an important influence on my writing [...] But his writing wasn’t consciously in my mind when I was writing *The Translator*. I was surprised after it was published that people saw all these parallels between my novel and his most famous text [...] For me, *Season of Migration* is a

²⁸ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 399.

²⁹ Achebe, *There was a Country*, p. 228.

³⁰ Achebe, *There was a Country*, p. 235.

³¹ Achebe, *There was a Country*, p. 247.

³² Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (Penguin: London, 2003), p. 120.

highly masculine book, largely because of all the violence in it, and in that way, when I was writing, I just couldn't see the connection.'³³ In Aboulela's *Minaret*, Anwar is portrayed as a violent masculine figure. Girls fall for him in Khartoum University, including Najwa, and he demonstrates his strong hatred for the west by burning the American flag. However, like Mustafa Sa'eed's futile sexual rage against the west,³⁴ Anwar's fervent anger against former colonial powers is also ineffective; after gaining asylum in London, his anti-imperialist convictions become less critical, and finally he disappears from the text. Aboulela through her female protagonists seeks the potential for love, faith, and reconciliation.³⁵ Islam in Aboulela's fiction must be seen as a personal faith in the daily life of her characters, rather than as political propaganda from a Muslim author. As Saba Mahmood contends, '[c]ritique [...] is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be remade in the process of engaging another worldview, that we might come to learn things that we did not already know before we undertook the engagement.'³⁶ Aboulela explores the potential for Islam to remake and teach in this way.

The politics of gender and class is important in the work of African women writers. Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* describes the educational journey of Samba Diallo and the problems he endures during that process. However, Tambu's educational journey in *Nervous Conditions* is fundamentally different from Samba, as she is a girl, and unlike him, does not belong to the social and cultural elite. The terror of Tambu's impoverished childhood has made colonial education an alluring prospect for her, as it is her only chance to advance her social and financial conditions. During her

³³ Claire Chambers, 'An Interview with Leila Aboulela', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 3/1 (2009), p. 96.

³⁴ See Edward Said, 'Criticism, Culture, and Performance', in *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), pp. 110-111; see also Brendan Smyth, 'To Love the Orientalist: Masculinity in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*', *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality*, 1.2 (2007), pp. 170-182.

³⁵ Willy Maley argues in his essay that 'love and the acceptance of another's world [...] is the true meaning of countering colonialism.' See Willy Maley, 'Conversion and Subversion in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* and Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*', in *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Scottish Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 185-197 (p. 190).

³⁶ Saba Mahmood, 'The Subject of Freedom', in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Trenton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 36.

educational adventure, Tambu remains happy at being away from her home and family, and does not express any desire to return. However, Samba's worry is 'whether [he] shall ever return' home.³⁷ Kane does not consider gender and class as significant categories to investigate the consequences of the African adventures of western education. The Most Royal Lady in *Ambiguous Adventure* has no name. The novel's introduction of her is reminiscent of Achebe's goddess imagery, where women are treated with great respect but have no agency: 'It was the Most Royal Lady speaking. She had come into the room without making a sound, as was her custom. [...] This was the hour of her daily visit to her brother.'³⁸ During that brief visit of public space, this unnamed woman prophesies the importance of western education for the welfare of the Diallobé people, and then disappears from the novel. In contrast, Dangarembga's work underlines class and gender as crucial factors which influence the process of acquiring colonial or western education; and therefore Samba's ambiguous adventure of western education becomes not only ambiguous but also anxious for Tambu.

Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* decries the abuse of the institution of polygamy by the 'so called "gentry" imbued with their role as master – a role which began and ended with fitting out and mounting the female.'³⁹ Bâ's association of 'pure bestiality'⁴⁰ with men's polygamous instincts in *So Long a Letter* is also reflected in El Hadji's observation about his soon to be third wife, N'Gone: 'He had to admit it, N'Gone had the savour of fresh fruit, which was something his wives had long since lost. He was drawn by her firm, supple body, her fresh breath. [...] She was good for his pride too – he was attractive to a young woman!'⁴¹ However, El Hadji fails to perform on his wedding night and starts consulting various marabouts to eradicate his 'xala' – sexual impotency. El Hadji's xala is a

³⁷ Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, trans. Katherine Woods (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 112.

³⁸ Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, p. 35.

³⁹ Ousmane Sembène, *Xala*, trans. Clive Wake (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1976), p. 63.

⁴⁰ Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter* (Harlow: Heinemann, 2008), p. 33.

⁴¹ Sembène, *Xala*, p. 8.

judgement on violent masculinities which are obstructing progress and prosperity in Senegalese society. El Hadji's xala embodies the impotence of the Senegalese political and social elite in running a newly independent country. During an interview, Sembène talks about the ineffective leadership of Africa: 'Nowadays, with the kind of policies that our leaders are engaged in, and here I am specifically talking about the French-speaking parts of Africa, they are the most alienated individuals I have ever seen. I think it is France that is really leading the job of dividing Africa. Most of our presidents have dual nationalities, French and African. When the going gets tough, they run away to Paris and all our decisions are made in Paris.'⁴² This incapacitated elite, as a result of its inability to run a country successfully, falls back on African traditions. The inept elite of Senegal, of which El Hadji is a member, do not only use their indigenous traditions as slogans but also exploit them fully to prove themselves potent, and this leads to the frustration of the hopes of independence.

The end of *Xala* discloses that El Hadji's own nervous condition is the punishment for his crimes of corruption and nepotism against fellow Senegalese. This becomes problematic for Jameson. Jameson uses Sembène's *Xala* in the formulation of his thesis of national allegory, and appears to take him to task for converting 'a satire whose subject matter or the content was the ritual curse visited on a character [...] to a ritual curse in its own right – the entire imagined chain of events becomes Ousmane's own curse upon his hero and people like him.'⁴³ For Jameson this exposes 'the primacy of national allegory in third-world literature.'⁴⁴ Jameson's thesis of 'national allegory' like Ngũgĩ's thesis on 'colonial education' and Senghor's 'Negritude', is a patriarchal construct, and therefore does not give space to Bâ's narratives of polygamy. Bâ's discussion of polygamy problematizes Jameson's thesis as she neither condemns polygamy as a backward tradition,

⁴² Bonnie Greer, 'Ousmane Sembène', *The Guardian*, 5th June 2005
<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2005/jun/05/features> [accessed 28th October 2013].

⁴³ Jameson, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', p. 84.

⁴⁴ Jameson, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', p. 84.

nor defends it as a part of her African identity. Rather, she criticises the abuse of the institution of marriage by both men and women. Bâ suggests that the abandonment and desertion of women is not exclusively connected with polygamy. The oppression of women is also endemic within monogamy. Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* details an oppressive monogamous marriage, which eventually falls apart. Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* (1991) is another novel that deals with polygamy in a more subtle way than Jameson's verdict on *Xala* will allow. Esi, in *Changes*, is an ambitious professional woman who finds monogamy stifling and decides to leave her husband Oko as '[he] wanted too much of her and her time.'⁴⁵ Believing that polygamy will allow her more freedom and personal space, she becomes the second wife to Ali. However, due to their busy schedule and Ali's womanising activities, their marriage suffers drastically: 'Their relationship stopped being a marriage. They became just good friends who found it convenient once in a while to fall into bed and make love.'⁴⁶ Esi finds herself unhappy in both monogamous and polygamous arrangements and wonders at the end of the novel: 'So what fashion of loving was she ever going to consider adequate?'⁴⁷ The text excoriates neither polygamy nor monogamy; rather presents them as different marriage choices with their distinctive challenges and compromises for the female protagonists.

African Women Writers and Eurocentrism

A key contention of this thesis is that African women writers' negotiation of identity takes place within highly specific cultural spaces and social locations. Eurocentrism should not be allowed to delegitimise African women writers' negotiations with the issue of female empowerment. For African women writers, feminism does not concentrate only on gender. Issues of race and the history of colonisation powerfully shape African women writers' discourses of female emancipation. The western hegemonic influence on feminism is the

⁴⁵ Ama Ata Aidoo, *Changes: A Love Story* (Harlow: Heinemann, 2004), p. 47.

⁴⁶ Aidoo, *Changes*, p. 197.

⁴⁷ Aidoo, *Changes*, p. 198.

cause of many African women writers' disaffection with the feminist label. As a result, the authors in my study (and many others, such as Ama Ata Aidoo and Flora Nwapa) maintain a carefully cultivated distance from western feminism. Instead, these authors tend to support African feminist critiques, such as 'womanism', 'stiwanism', 'motherism', and 'negofeminism.' These approaches, according to Stephanie Newell, have arisen from the vibrant process in which women re-write themselves. The challenge has been to pursue social progress and assemble a women's history while simultaneously avoiding immersion in 'western feminist discourses which have tended to subordinate and speak on behalf of the typical "third world woman."' ⁴⁸ The female characters in these African women writers' work are active agents in their respective societies. Bâ's Aissatou and Ramatoulaye do not let motherhood stifle their ambitions and aspirations. Debbie, as a Nigerian army officer, narrates the female versions of the Nigerian tragedy. Adichie's Olanna and Kainene reproach the greed and venality of both Nigerian and Biafran leaders who caused untold suffering to further their own narrow political interests. Dangarembga's Tambu challenges Ngũgĩ's thesis on colonial education. Ngũgĩ argues that colonial education '[takes] us further and further [...] from our world to other worlds,' ⁴⁹ and subsequently produces 'a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies.' ⁵⁰ However, Tambu's ardent desire for education and her disdain towards her home complicates Ngũgĩ's thesis on the decapitating violence of colonial education. Tambu narrates her version of the process, where, despite its implicit racism, colonial education provides her with a measure of financial stability in white dominated Rhodesia. Finally, Aboulela's Sammar and Najwa are not seeking help from nationalistic or patriotic narratives; rather they rely on their faith to sustain them through personally challenging times.

⁴⁸ Stephanie Newell, 'Writing African Women: Gender, Popular Culture and Literature in West Africa' in *Writing African Women: Gender, Popular Culture and Literature in West Africa*, ed. Stephanie Newell (London: Zed Books, 1997), pp. 1-2.

⁴⁹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 'The Language of African Literature', in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), p. 12.

⁵⁰ Ngũgĩ, 'The Language of African Literature', p. 28.

Bâ, Emecheta, Adichie, Dangarembga, and Aboulela are communicating stories which need to be analysed and criticised within their unique cultural and material contexts. These African writers are joining others interested in the ‘utopian dream of coalition and connection’⁵¹ described by Susan Stanford Friedman, who notes: ‘As the globe shrinks, as racially and ethnically inflected confrontations increase worldwide, as weapons become even more deadly and available, as transnational economies further polarize wealth and poverty [...] our survival as a species depends on our ability to recognize the borders between difference as fertile spaces of desire and fluid sites of syncretism, interaction, and mutual change.’⁵² This thesis has sought to extend these new ways of critically engaging with African women’s writing, in a world that is only just waking up to its importance.

Current Developments and Future Questions

The purpose of the Women Writing Africa project (WWA), launched in April 1994, was to bring African women’s voices into the public sphere through fostering ‘new readings of African history by shedding light on the dailiness of women’s lives as well as their rich contribution to culture.’⁵³ As a result of this project, four volumes of work by African women writers were produced: from southern Africa, from west Africa, from east Africa, and from north Africa.⁵⁴ In 2004, the journal *African Literature Today* focused upon the work of African women writers for its twenty-fourth volume, ‘New Women’s Writing in African Literature.’ This came seventeen years after the journal first engaged with African women writers, in its fifteenth volume ‘Women in African Literature Today’ (1987). In

⁵¹ Susan Stanford Friedman, “‘Beyond’ White and Other: Narratives of Race in Feminist Discourse”, in *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 66.

⁵² Friedman, “‘Beyond’ White and Other: Narratives of Race in Feminist Discourse”, p. 66.

⁵³ Tuzyline Jita Allan, Abena P. A. Busia, and Florence Howe, ‘A Note on the Women Writing Africa Project’, in *Women Writing Africa: West Africa and the Sahel*, p. xviii.

⁵⁴ See M. J. Daymond, Dorothy Driver, Sheila Meintjes, Leloba Molema, Chiedza Musengezi, Margie Orford, and Nobantu Rasebotsa, ed. *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2003); Esi Sutherland-Addy, Aminata Diaw, ed. *Women Writing Africa: West Africa and the Sahel* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2005); Amandina Lihamba, Fulata L. Moyo, M. M. Mulokozi, Naomi L. Shitemi, and Saida Yahya-Othman, ed. *Women Writing Africa: The Eastern Region* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2007); and Fatima Sadiqi, Amira Nowaira, Azza El Kholy, and Moha Ennaji, ed. *Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2009).

2009, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Tuzyline Jita Allan edited an essay collection entitled *Twelve Best Books by African Women: Critical Readings*. The purpose of this volume, according to Ogunyemi, is the official establishment of ‘a female literary tradition.’⁵⁵

There is a powerful new presence of African women writers in the literary marketplace; their work is now reaching new audiences both at home and abroad. Helen Oyeyemi, a 29 year old Nigerian writer, has produced so far five works of fiction: *The Icarus Girl* (2005), *The Opposite House* (2007), *White is for Witching* (2009), *Mr Fox* (2011), and *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014). Oyeyemi was named a Granta best young novelist in 2013. Her debut novel *The Icarus Girl* is about an eight year old girl named Jessamy who is torn between her British and Nigerian identities. Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani is another emerging Nigerian writer. Her debut novel, *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* (2009), deals with digital Africa and the business of ‘419’ scams. Through these phenomena Nwaubani explores the social crisis and unemployment challenging Nigerian youth as a result of decades of corrupt dictatorial governments, ethnic tensions and army coups. *We Need New Names* (2013) by Zimbabwean writer NoViolet Bulawayo has claimed many critical accolades.⁵⁶ In this novel, Bulawayo deals with issues related to Mugabe’s violence against white farmers, the Chinese presence in Africa, and escape from the ghetto in Zimbabwe to America in the hope of a better life. Chibundu Onuzo is a Nigerian writer who published her first novel *The Spider King’s Daughter* (2012) at the

⁵⁵ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, ‘Prolepsis: Twelve Telling Tales by African Women’, in *Twelve Best Books by African Women: Critical Readings*, ed. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Tuzyline Jita Allan (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2009), p. 1.

⁵⁶ Bulawago’s novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize (2013) and the Guardian First Book Award (2013), was finalist for the Barnes & Noble Discover Award (2013), and was the winner of the inaugural Etisalat Prize for Literature (2013).

age of 21, to wide critical acclaim.⁵⁷ The narrative is set in Lagos, and is a love story between two teenagers from different social backgrounds.

There are many factors which have contributed to the recent success and visibility of new African women writers as compared to their predecessors. One significant element is the changing landscape of the publishing business. Women's increased prominence in the publishing industry is encouraging for African women writers. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, who holds a PhD in Gender Studies from the University of Warwick, co-founded the Cassava Republic Press in Nigeria in 2006. The purpose of this publishing house is to produce quality fiction and non-fiction for both adults and children with a focus on African writing.⁵⁸ Cassava Republic Press has also published Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's debut novel *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* in Nigeria. The Feminist Press based in New York has published *Women Writing Africa*, a four-volume series based on the creative work of women writers from across the African continent. Becky Nana Ayebia Clarke is a Ghanaian publisher based in Oxfordshire. She set up the Ayebia Clarke Literary Agency & Publishing Limited in 2003 in order to promote African and Caribbean creative writing. According to Clarke, the Caine Prize for African Writing, which began in 2000, has also played an important role in bringing African writers into sharper focus; it not only gives the winner a year's fellowship at a prestigious western university, but also prompts immense media coverage.⁵⁹ Leila Aboulela was the winner of the inaugural Caine Prize in 2000 for her short story 'The Museum.' She is now an established African writer who has published three novels and a collection of short stories. Displacements or soft exiles from the countries of birth also developed the writing career of young African women writers, as most of them are based in various western countries, for example, the UK (Chibundu Onuzo), USA (NoViolet Bulawayo), and Belgium (Helen Oyeyemi). This also

⁵⁷ Onuzo's novel was shortlisted for the 2012 Dylan Thomas Prize and longlisted for the Desmond Elliott prize in 2012. It was also shortlisted for the Commonwealth Book Prize (2013).

⁵⁸ <http://www.cassavarepublic.biz/pages/about-us> [accessed 21st of April 2014].

⁵⁹ <http://www.african-writing.com/ayebia.htm> [accessed 21st of April 2014]

demonstrates that writing is still not an easy career for women who are living in Africa.

However, one exception is Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, who obtained an international publishing contract for her debut novel while living in Nigeria. This shift in international publishing patterns signals growing interest in African women's fiction, where narratives are not fixed on famine, war and poverty. Nadine Gordimer's 1991 Nobel Prize in literature was also instrumental in bringing attention to African women writers.

Universities like SOAS, the University of Birmingham, the University of Edinburgh, and Princeton University and other institutions across the world are offering courses at honours and masters level on African literature, which not only generates scholarly interest in African literature but also contributes to intellectual and critical debates, of which gender is a crucial part. All these new developments in publishing and writing industries and the enormous success of African women writers indicate the destabilisation of gender hierarchies in various African countries, even if they are not completely eradicated. The prevalence of emerging themes concerned with the lives of young people in contemporary Africa, their socio-political problems, internet scams, the politics of displacement, and how female agency is affected by these issues, kindles important questions that will shape the direction of future research on African women writers.

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